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Hekman, William Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Interview with Bill Hekman
Interviewed by Todd Tulgestke on 3/16/99
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TT: This is Todd Tulgestke, it's the 16th of March 1999 and I'm here with Mr. William Hekman. Could you tell me your date of birth, place of birth?

WH: Date of birth is [date removed], 1928. Born in a town called Terapel in the Province of Groningen in the Netherlands.

TT: What year was the year of emigration for you?

WH: We emigrated in January 1952.

TT: Can you describe a little bit what your homeland was like? What it was like to live there as a child?

WH: Well, we lived in this relatively small rural town. When I was 12 years old we had the German invasion, so we lived for five years under German occupation and afterward I found that the country needed some economic help which it got from the Marshall Plan but I was too young to worry about too much, I got called in the army. I served in the Dutch Armed Forces, and I served two years in Indonesia.

WH: And after I got back from Indonesia I went back to a technical college for a little while and then I decided to emigrate.

TT: What were the main reasons for emigration? What prompted you to leave?

WH: Well, at that time there were a lot of people going to various countries. Some of them went to America, a lot of them went to Canada, a lot of them went to other places as well. South Africa and Australia, I got relatives all over the world. As far as I'm concerned, I thought economic situation in America would be much better than they
were in the Netherlands. Besides that I wanted to raise a family. I think that any
children we might have would have much better opportunity in America than they
would have in Europe or in the Netherlands.

TT: So the largest factor was economic mostly?

WH: Yes, mostly economic. And another thing that comes in is for me is I had been also for
two years in Indonesia. That's a big country, it's a large country and then when you
come back to the Netherlands the country seems awfully small. Another thing is that
the way the Dutch government handled the situation in Indonesia really got me upset. I
was really at odds with the government over that issue. And there was another issue
that was a major issue, which is the government control over everything. You couldn't
do anything without getting all kind of permission and what not. And we didn't have
that in America although its been coming here too.

TT: Who did you travel to the United States with?

WH: We came across by a, by boat and we sailed from South Hampton England aboard the
Mauritania. This is a large boat from the Cunard line. An English company. We
landed in Hoboken. And we traveled by train from New York. First by taxi from the
boat to Central Station in New York which a hairy ride. And then by train to Grand
Rapids. When we arrived in Grand Rapids there were big heaps of snow.

TT: Really?

WH: That was in January.

TT: Did everyone in your family come, or was it just you?

WH: I had, well we had, relatives in Grand Rapids at that time. We still have them. The
Hekmans, they were well known in Grand Rapids. They sponsored us. John Hekman from the Hekman Biscuit Company who sponsored my brother. They were cousins of my dad, these Hekmans. Sponsored my brother to come back in 48. And then another brother came in 1950 I think. A sister and her husband came in 1951 or there about. Then we came, my wife and I came. We were newly married, we made our honey moon trip to the United States. And then a month later my parents came with two of my sisters yet. So ultimately we ended up in the United States, my folks ended up here my two brothers and three sisters ended up here and two brother stayed behind.

TT: Did they come later or did they stay there?

WH: No, No. I got one older brother. My oldest brother died since and my other brother still lives in the Netherlands. I'm the youngest of the brothers.

TT: Big family.

WH: Eight kids yeah.

TT: What were the main reasons your family chose the United States do you think instead of one of those other countries?

WH: Well, the United States was the most desirable place to go to from immigrants or immigration....what do you call them....points of view. People liked to go to America rather than some other country...but its rather difficult to get in the United States because they had a quota system. There was a certain amount of people they let in. You had to have proper relations. Somebody had to be your sponsor. And if you had no relations or no friends or family it would be hard to get your name listed as a possible immigrant.
TT: So you came to Grand Rapids first, and then to Holland after that?

WH: We were in Grand Rapids for a couple years and then came to Holland and we've been in Holland since...oh I would say 1953. Late 1953 we came to Holland and have been in Holland ever since.

TT: What attracted you to Holland specifically? Rather than going to another place in Michigan?

WH: Oh well, you know you have to find work. And I had found a job that brought me to Holland and uh...I've had many jobs since that time....one year I seven jobs in one year I think.....I didn't have enough room on my income tax paper to put it all on there.

TT: I guess!

WH: But that was a....It looked attractive to us to come to Holland.

WH: My parents had come to Holland and I had a couple brothers living in Holland, so we found Holland a good place to be.

TT: What were your first impressions of the Holland area? Do you recall any of them?

WH: Oh, we liked it very much. We fitted right in. Our background is with the Gereformeerde Kerk in the Netherlands which is a sister church...or at least at that time was sister church to the Christian Reformed Church. So we had our church home here, we had a Christian school here.

TT: Can you describe some of the problems you faced adjusting to life here as far as language...English speaking? Or any sort of problems?

WH: Well, the language wasn't too much of a problem to us. We knew how to speak
English before we came here. As matter of fact when we were in school we studied English, French, and German. When I was 18 years old I corresponded with a boy in French, in Wales, in Paris I mean, with a girl in Wales in English, and with a boy in Switzerland in German....but I didn't keep that up. So when we arrived by train we, on the way from New York to Grand Rapids we talked with a conductor, and we had a very interesting talk. And when we got to Ann Arbor we had to change trains. The conductor said come on, I'll buy you guys, my wife and I, a cup of coffee. And we went to the depot there and uh....a cup of coffee cost five cents. And I was trying very hard to cool down the coffee blowing on it and the conductor says....what the hurry, take your time....and I says, I don't want to miss the train to Grand Rapids.....he said look, I'm the conductor on the train to Grand Rapids too, and the train ain't gonna move until I blow the whistle. And I will not blow the whistle until you finish your coffee. So I said to him, well here's a cup of coffee for five cents, and the people treat you very well. Its very good beginning, I said we probably came to the right country.. I had a good beginning that way.

TT: Good. Good. Where were you first employed when coming to West Michigan?

WH: Oh, my first job was with the now defunct Vandenberg Furniture Company in uh Grand Rapids. They were located, where the downtown Grand Plaza is. And what we had to do, we had to deliver furniture first on day in the city and then the other days we would go outside the city so we had a chance to drive with the driver in the truck to various towns as far away as Petosky and Cheboygan. And then in Grand Rapids itself too. So we had an opportunity to get to the know the city, Grand Rapids, so to see
some of Michigan, well at the same time a chance to talk to the driver and sharpen the English language, which is not always easy. You make some mistakes. One time he took me to a restaurant and said, "come on you want to have a hot dog?" and I said "no, I don't eat dogs." But you mispronounce words like we'd go down Walker Street which runs Northwest through Grand Rapids and I said to him, "you know this street is different then the others, it doesn't go with the other streets, it goes on an angel." So, it's supposed to be angle of course. You have to look at the humorous side of it.

TT: It's expected. So you didn't have any trouble finding employment?

WH: No, I didn't always like the employment I found, but then I didn't stay. Like I worked for three days at Keeler Brass and I had to do a monotonous thing all over again and I figured if I had to do this all my life I'd just go back to the Netherlands again, so after two and a half days I walked out, I quit. So, I started working for different odd jobs, you never had difficulty finding a job. Never had a problem with that. But I also am firmly convinced that a young person should pick a certain thing that he wants to work on and then stay with it. Of course that where you learn the trade and that's where you make the most headway. Which I did, I worked for a heating company, and I stayed with the heating business pretty much.

TT: So, can you tell me if the move from the Netherlands had any affect on your family or your family traditions, and if there are any parts of the Netherlands that are still part of your family traditions?

WH: Oh, I wouldn't know about family traditions. When you are young, in your twenties and just married you kinda build your own traditions. We grew up in a war time, it
was unusual times. But there are still some old Dutch costumes that you take along. When Christmas time roles around you bake these Dutch cookies and when New Years Eve comes you make "oliebollen." That type of thing. There's one thing that you had as an immigrant that we experienced when you're young you make friends with other young couples, but we were a little bit out of it because they talk about their high school experiences and things like that and we didn't have any high school experiences. I never went to any American schools so you really didn't have that type of background you can't really talk with them on that same subject very well. Later on, when you get older then you get more in common with all the couples and you can talk of subjects more of mutual interest. But the difficulty is, that I experienced, I had a college education from the Netherlands, but it was from Dutch schools that were not recognized here. So, I kinda started out badly. You didn't know anybody and you try to rub shoulders with people that you feel comfortable with but you didn't always have that chance. I overcame part of that by joining Kiwanis Club and that was a help for me. And of course as time goes on you get to know more people.

TT: Can you tell me why you have stayed in Holland and some of the things you have been involved in, in the Holland community such as Kiwanis?

WH: Well, you realize I was here in Holland working for a heating company, but there were two brothers who owned that company and the older brother had a heart attack and the other brother wanted to get out of the business. So I tried to find another job with another heating company but could not find one. So they talked me into taking over their business. I had been here only maybe three years or so, so I was kind of hesitant
about taking over a heating business. But, I didn’t see any other way to stay in my chosen profession so I tried it and have been in business for myself until I retired.

TT: So it worked out well then?

WH: It worked out very well, but it took me a while to figure out how to run a business. I did learn pretty well how to do that. I’ve been pretty successful I think.

TT: Could you talk a little bit about your church affiliation?

WH: I belong to a Christian Reformed Church. When I moved from town to the North Side I moved also to the North Side churches. I’ve served several terms as elder in the church and have been member in several committees in the church. So I think I’ve made my contribution to the church. In Kiwanis, I’ve served a couple times as the club president and served two terms as lieutenant governor.

TT: So you’ve become quite involved?

WH: Yeah, I was chairman of the travelogues, which we show in Holland every winter and I’ve chaired that committee for seventeen years. Then finally, I had two sons and they were not interested in taking over my business. They are doing something else. So, then I merged with another heating company in town and slowly faded out. Since that time I do a lot of volunteer work. Matter of fact, looking at your recording equipment over there brings back memories. We went to Dominica in the Caribbean, my wife and I managed a radio station for the Back to God Hour. We used to go sometimes, I would have one of my staff members go out with one of those things and find anything interesting going on the island, some speaker or some dedication or something, he would go out and make a recording and broadcast it over our radio.
TT: How did you happen to come to manage a radio station?

WH: Well, that station is owned by the Back to God Hour which is the radio voice of the Christian Reformed Church, and I had been working with RACOM Associates which is a support organization of the Back to God Hour and they told me that they needed somebody on rather short notice to manage the radio station so my wife and I volunteered to go there. We were there for fourteen months. We could have stayed longer but we decided that we did not want to be away from the kids and the grandkids that long, fourteen months was long enough.

TT: In the last decade or so, Holland has become more and more culturally diverse. When you see new immigrants settling in the Holland area, especially the Hispanic and Asian communities, what is the feelings toward these immigrants from the Dutch community?

WH: Well, being an immigrant myself I would not have any objection to immigrants as long as they prove themselves to be good citizens. Unfortunately we have also among them some elements that are less desirable. We've gotten Hispanic gangs and Oriental gangs that are less desirable. I think part of the thing is the town is a pleasant town, always was, it's getting to be a big city now. I recall when they formed to Holland Economic Development Corporation some years back, local business people did, and the aim was at that time to make the local industry grow at the same rate as the population growth so that we would have jobs for future generations. However, the local business has grown much faster than anticipated which has attracted a lot of people to live in Holland. I just hope that they keep Holland the way it was in the past and don't make a big city out of it. We certainly don't need anything like night clubs and that type of
thing.

TT:   How do you feel about the Dutch heritage that Holland has tried to preserve?

WH:   Oh I hope that they do, that's very good. They should do that, I mean its a Dutch town settled by Dutch people and to deny the heritage would be a large mistake. I don't say that they should ignore the other people, they have their place too, but our main heritage is Dutch here. I think that our present mayor is doing a fine job. It's also a good idea to have ties with Mexico now because we have a lot of Spanish people here now.

TT:   Have you experienced any discrimination since you've been in Holland?

WH:   Not to speak of, no. There was some Dutch immigrants who got here a generation sooner and I think there was a little bit jealousy involved sometimes. If you were to say that the potatoes from the Netherlands were tastier than the ones here, then they would say, why don't you go back there then, that was in the beginning. But, not lately, none at all. We've been assimilated pretty much.

TT:   What paths have your children taken? Do they speak Dutch or have any interest in the Netherlands.

WH:   No none of them speak Dutch, we never spoke it in our home.

TT:   What would you say to a friend who was considering immigrating to the United States? What kind of advice could you give them?

WH:   Well, I could point out a lot of things wrong in the United States, but its also still the best country there is in the world today.

TT:   Alright, thank you very much Mr. Hekman. I think that's about it. Thank you very
much for taking the time to give us your story. It is very important will be saved.