Wiechertjes, John Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Ann Paeth
Oral History Interview with
John Wiechertjes

(unedited)

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by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
The first thing I need you to do is state your name and where and when you were born.

My name is John Wiechertjes. I was born May 1, 1920 in the Netherlands in Haule, Ooststellingwerf.

Why don't you tell us how it is you came here and when?

I was only young. I always wanted to leave that country. The reason maybe is this, that I always saw my father working from early in the morning to late at night. There was never rest. It was on a farm. He was a worker. We are workers, too. It's in your blood. It happened that my mother had died at 32. I went through an awful lot, a second marriage, and I saw a lot of misery. It was in the land, in the field, in the government, in the home, although we had a Christian home, I'll never forget that. But I always wanted to go someplace. I was 14 and I had to leave the school. I had no education. Just seven grades. I couldn't go to another school. Only city kids did that. Farmers' kids had to work. No questions. Father said this is it. So when I was 14 years old, I came out of school, and I wanted to go to grandma's farm. There are little states in the Netherlands. One is all cows. That's Friesland. The other is Groningen, that's all crops. My grandma had a big farm, and there were uncles and an aunt. I said to my dad, "I want to go to my grandma's house." He said, "I sell you to my grandma's house! You've got to milk those
cows." So that was against my will that I was in Friesland. I didn’t like cows.

Finally, I had to go in the army in 1939. When I came in the army, there was a city.

I stopped talking, and I woke up, and they said to me, "To what university do you go?" I didn’t go no place. I was just through seven grades and I have to milk these cows. It woke me up, but I still didn’t catch on. I should have went to school. I missed the boat. Then the war came. I came during the war. I was five days in that war. Then it was over. I saw a lot of things. I saw dead people. I saw buses burn down, bombs coming down. I was the first one after the war coming home to Friesland again. I said to myself, "Now I am going to do my best." I was a little while there, maybe a year and a half, I couldn’t take it. It was always my fault, and my sister said to men, "John, you can’t do everything right, why don’t you go where you want to go?" Then I finally put an ad in the paper. Nobody knew this. I had a friend someplace. I wanted to go to Groningen to the crop land. I got five letters. I thought, "Uh oh, now I’m going to leave this?" I didn’t tell my parents that. I was so scared. I thought, "I can’t do this." I gave it up. Then one day, my sister walked in the street and boyfriends came, and my stepmother was not nice to them, and I spoke up. Then my father was a good man, but he said, and not in a nice way, "It’s a lot better that you leave." It was not my fault. That Sunday, I went to church like we always do. The last song was a Dutch song: The Lord will show you true, and everything that happens, so you go in faith. I said to my father, "If you say I can go, next week Monday, I will go." The next week Monday, I went out like that.

He was milking the cows. My step mother gave me ten dollars and a couple of
shirts, and that was it. I was a poor boy. I passed my father, and he says to me, "I can see like Job, I lost everything." What did he mean? It means, his first wife, and then his oldest son, too. "But as a father I go by faith," he said, "You have no faith." Look at how far it was that a father says that to his son, "You have no faith." I lived by faith, I live still by faith, and I still missed the boat. But I didn’t know that. So then I went on. Then I came by my aunt. I was close to where her farm was. My sister, I asked her where must I go, and she said, "There." So I went there. There I went through so much. I can’t go into this. I have told that story and it took two hours. Out of that I learned an awful lot, and I knew how to run a farm. I was in an accident the first week, and the doctor said later on one out of hundred come out this, but the Lord was saved my life. That’s what I believe. Then I left that place, and I went to another place. In a war, you’ve got to hide. It’s so funny, they never grabbed me. I was in a place there, and then my uncle was in concentration camp, and I thought, October 10, 1944, I thought maybe they need some help there. I went through danger. There’s one place they shot all the husbands and all the boys, 150 men, they were all killed by Germany, and there was nothing left but widow ladies. I was just before that. That’s only one of the dangerous places. There was more of that. Then I came by my aunt, and my uncle was in concentration camp. I said, "I want to help you." And I… work, work, so many potatoes in the field. Then my uncle came back. The Groningen people are fine people, but they’re proud people. They are like, "Here I come!" I don’t like that. He was like that. He told me I should of done this or that. I thought, "What’s
the matter with you? You were in a camp, and I worked day and night, my tail off.
And you say that?" I thought, "This is it. I am not going to be here." Finally, I put
an ad in the paper, and two ladies answered that ad. One was a lady with a lot of
machinery. The other farmers said, "John, you can't do that." I said, "Maybe not."
I had never run a ______ machine. It was a lady way in the sticks. "But you
don't want to live there. You come by me," the guy said. I said, "No." And there I
went. I went on my bike to that house. That husband and his brother were shot in
the war, so she was a widow lady with two little lovely kids. The boy was one and a
half and the girl was three. The first thing she said, "My husband was a real good
farmer." I thought, "I got to get out of this place." I wanted to get out of it. Her
father-in-law hired me, and I wanted to get out of there. I said, "I can't do this, I
can't do nothing." He doesn't say to me, "What are you doing here?" He only said
this, "John, we live for eternity, we don't live for this life. There's a wife there with
two little children. There's no father. Could you pray and read the Bible three times
a day?" I said, "By but the grace of God, maybe I can do that." "Then you go
there," he said, "and if you don't know anything, we will help you." Two years
later, we married. We've got now seven children, and the Lord is great. Then her
father went to America for a trip. Her brother lived here in Holland, Michigan.
Then, oh boy, there comes the guy from the ______, William Scherbeek, her
uncle, and he came to visit in the Netherlands, and he bragged about America. Her
family had seven children, and five of the seven went, in one year, to America and
one to Canada, and two stayed there. That happened in three generations. Finally I
said to her, we could stay there--I had a farm there, renting a farm. She said, "You
don't have to." She really didn't want to go. I want to go to Brazil. I want to go to
Africa. I want to go to Indonesia. I want to go to Zeeland. I always go to these
meetings to immigrate. All of a sudden my wife says to me, "John, listen to me. If
we go, we got to Uncle Bill." That was here. I thought, "At least we can go." That
was the thing that finally through her and her family, there were two brothers her
already and a sister in Canada, through her I came here first. OK, now we're here.
Then the disappointments also came because I was a farmer, and I thought you could
just grab a farm here. I was very disappointed. The first thing I said when we came
to 17th Street, "A wooden house?" We had never seen wooden houses. It's all
brick. I thought, "What is this?" Then I saw farms, and there was a lot of junk and
weeds this high, and the old barns, there is no paint on them. There it's all neat, but
if you say that in America, you can't say that. Then the Americans will say, "What
are you doing here, why don't you go back?" I was really disappointed. They stuck
me in a furniture factory. We had five children then, and later on two more. In
1951, the labor was only ninety-five cents per hour. But because I had five kids, and
my Uncle Bill's son worked there, I got five more cents. So I worked at the furniture
factory for three months. Then I went to Chris-Craft for seventeen years, and I
worked there with these wonderful people. And I met those wonderful Christian
people in the factory. There were all kinds of people from all kinds of churches, and
they were so sweet. American people are such wonderful people, I think so,
wonderful. I had seven kids, and we do Christian Schools and so forth. Always
going to sell something. I sold this and I sold that. My wife thought, "What’s the matter with him?" I got all those little boxes yet. Finally, I came into the selling business. There was a guy selling automotive. Anyway, I was seventeen years in the factory, and then I jumped out on the road. I met all those wonderful American people. My voice has a brogue. I’ll tell you one little thing. I was in Calcasca with my truck, and there was a man, he was a Baptist minister and he had a gas station, and he said to me, "I always buy from you." I said to him, "Bruce, how can that be? You didn’t know when I was coming." "No," he said, "but I always know just about. But it makes no difference. I always buy from you." I said, "What is it that makes you buy from me?" He said, "You know what? As a salesman, your approach is right, and your brogue is beautiful to listen to." That was a 150 miles that way. Two weeks later I go 150 miles the other way to Calcasca and a big Shell Station. He says, "I’ve got three salespeople already. You are number four." I said, "I’m not a salesman. I’m just an old peddler." "Don’t tell me that," he says, "You’ve always got something in your truck. I always find something. I always buy from you." I said to him, "George, tell me, why do you do that? Why always you buy?" He says, "You must not get embarrassed." I said, "I will not. But why do you buy?" "Well John," he says, "You are a perfect salesman. Your approach is just right. You don’t overdo it. You don’t brag about it. You don’t say, 'If you buy this you get that.’ That’s all bologna anyway. And your brogue is beautiful. I love to listen to it." I said, "That’s why these crazy people in Michigan buy? Because I talk a little funny." They overbought. I had so much fun. If you could have my
feelings, how I could come from all that. American people have made what I am today. American people are flexible people, are friendly people, are happy people. They are not looking down like this, saying, "He's an immigrant." That's amazing. Holland people do that some. We had people from the Netherlands over here for six days. He thinks he can talk English. He doesn't have to talk English here. We are all Dutch. We all can talk Dutch. Here he comes. His sister-in-law is in the cemetery. He says, "Cemetery," to let me know that he can talk English. That's the Holland. The Hollander is a proud person. The Hollander is a jealous person. Sorry to say that. This country is not that way. This country is a free country. If I have a car and the neighbor got a car, so what? It's only a car. But in the Netherlands, oh boy! "This is my car. This is my house. This is so. I got this." Let them see all the bologna there. I cannot take it any more. We don't go back, I think. But we've been there many times. I took all my kids there when they were little, and then I took them all about when they were thirty or thirty-five years. They have been twice back. They have seen my parents. They have seen the country. They say, "It's a wonderful little, small country, but we are glad to be back in America," and, "Thank you dad for coming to America." They all work. They all have plenty. They all are good. They don't go to the government and say, "Help my, please." We're not people like that. Never. One time I was laid-off. They said, "John, where is your unemployment?" I said, "What is unemployment money?" I didn't know. I worked at Heinz at night. "You're crazy. You can get that free." I said I never learned to hold my hands up. We were not brought up that way. Now
you can see with seven kids, they all work, they all do their best. This land is a great land, a great country. After I was on the road selling, it was just a pleasure. I bought it wholesale. I put it in my truck, and I was nice and honest to the customers. They liked that, and I could make money, and all of a sudden, we got too much money. What happened? We had a couple of houses one time and rented them out. On E. 19th Street there were four apartments, and I wanted to by another house. We had some extra money. My wife said, "No, we don't want the old houses." So I went to Grand Rapids, and some guy had bought an apartment unit at sixty units, a guy from the Netherlands. "John, it's really simple to do that," he said, "Put some money in your house, go to the bank, and it works by itself." I had the money. He had to go put it on his house. He bought apartments there. It took me three months to think about that. We bought these apartments on 19th Street, it was one building, we had four people in there, and we built three more. The last one was for my son. I loaned him the money. They are still there. We've been here forty-five years in this country. Now look here, we get social security. I said to myself, "Shame on me that I take that." They are so deep in debt, this country, and they give me that money? They say, "You're crazy, because you have paid into that." I didn't need that social security. See now what you can do in another country? If you do the right thing, anybody can do right in this country. So today, we still have some money over it to unload these apartments. We sold them in ten years, and they sold four times. But there are not nice flowers there now. I had flowers there. There is one lady, she's 90 years old, she's in a rest home, I visit her, she still says, "John,
your flowers were so nice. Now, look, there's nothing there."

I'm so glad that we are here, and what we have done doesn't matter. My father was a worker, I worked. I did the extra work, and was not lazy. My kids do all the same. But if you're retired and you have no hobby, what are you going to do then? That drives me crazy. I retired. I don't have to do nothing. Now I do volunteer work in the hospital. I love to do that. I go to the rest homes and go to the older people, and they lay on those beds, and I read with them the scripture, and I sing with them a song, and if they are on their deathbed, then I go to them. These people are Dutch people, and they sing the Dutch psalm, and I sing it with them. I'm a member of Hospice, also, and they call me up and say, "John, there's a man that has cancer. Will you please go to him? He wants to hear the Dutch psalms." And I go to the man and I sing the one song, and his hand moves up like this. He says, "There we are going to be." Isn't that wonderful how the Lord had led us to this land? Now, I've been a little bit too busy. My heart problem is at 70%. A couple of little strokes. Here I sit again. I can ride my car, and I can talk a little bit. I must only say that this is a great land of freedom. A lot of people do not understand that. They think everything is for free. We are not brought up that way. You know why this town is like it is? Herman Miller, Ed Prince, all those companies? The people have dedication and they work and are honest. That's why those companies grow so fast. That's why they've got all those buildings and all those nice things here. I am against that crazy union business. Always, more money, more money. You've got to help yourself. I have also spoken at a few schools, because my
grandkids go to school and they talk about the war. Nobody knows nothing about it. My grandkids say, my grandpa knows, he was in that. They took me to that school. I thought, "Oh boy, I can’t do that." The whole gym was full of people. I told them about the war. I told them how I saved a little girl on my bike. Some people were so hungry, they gave me a little girl on that bike, and I took her along to the farm. That little girl had little brown eyes, wonderful. My aunt took care of her. My uncle came back from the camp, and the first thing he said was, "Where is the little girl?" Those things. I do not brag about that. But looking back on my life, it’s just an amazing thing. My wife, she lost her husband in the war. They shot him and his brother. She never talks about it. One day, my heart was out of order, and she was so worried. My kids talked to her, and they said, "Mom, do you ever think about your first marriage?" Mom said, "Yes, but that’s long gone. The grass grew over that. I love your dad." That lady was so worried. She is still worried now yet, but she doesn’t have to. I’ve got to take it easy, and take it calm, but I love to talk, and I love to tell the stories. There is no end. I have given you only a little thing. It is only a drop of the bucket of all the things I have experienced.

AP: Can you describe what Holland was like when you first came here? What the city was like? That was in 1951?

JW: Yes. We rented a house on River Avenue across from the Standard Gas Station. There were a couple of houses there. We rented a house. I was so amazed when I came to this country. I saw these big cars. Now I don’t see it. The first thing I had an impression of was a train. That was amazing, too. I saw big cars, and I saw the
wonderful station, and I got my camera out, and I made all these pictures, black and white, nice pictures. I was always making pictures. I would go to the cemetery with my kids on Sunday after church, and I would say, "Stand in a row, there," and I made pictures of them. We got these old pictures and they’re all standing in a row. I thought Holland was amazing, except for the wooden houses. I don’t see that so much. The City Hall was there and the bank was there. We rented a house, and I was three months on River Avenue there. That was not nice. We left there. The man, his daughter was a missionary. He didn’t want us in the house because of the five kids. But the daughter said, "Dad, you cannot do that." Then we went in that house. There were bushes in front of the house, I thought, "This is a mess." I cleaned them all out. The owner came--"What did you do?" I didn’t understand I couldn’t do that. I wanted to make it nice and clean. Then we looked for a house on 16th Street. There we bought a house for $7,000. I didn’t have the money. I had only $400. So my uncle gave me six to borrow. We had taken some other things from the other country that we could sell here.

But your question is Holland. For me, when I was so young, and I was 31 years old, everything was for me great. But I saw these farms with all these weeds so high, that was not what I liked. So I came to the factory on a bike. I was impressed. The churches here are so different from there. They were small. I am impressed of the easiness of this country. The simpleness. We bought a house and the realtor goes to our church, and he said, "John, you’ve got to sign the paper." A little slip of paper, so I signed it. That was the deed for our house. So simple. Now
it's a little different. We were here ten years, and I sponsored my sister. I bought a
house on 14th Street. She said, "John, to dad, you had said that in ten years you
would be back." So we went back there, and we left the oldest daughter here with
three kids, and we took the youngest kids along. We shouldn't have done that, but
she was a responsible girl. The realtor sat in the church on Sunday, and he would
say, "Look, there they go." She took them in church like we took them in church.
My oldest daughter took the others to church. She went to the school, and they were
perfect. We didn't look so close. We were happy we were here because of
everything was so different, the people were friendly, the school was really good, the
church picked us up. There was a minister who could talk a little Groningen, and I
can, too. He would come over and sit on a little box. He was fine. I always hang
around these ministers. Good pastors. It was a good place. I was not thinking about
what I think now, at this age. I was still a young person, 31, and I had much
adventure. I saw everything was flowers for me, here. Although it was not, I guess,
but I saw it that way. I've forgotten so much, too. I was full of pep. Full of
energy. I couldn't sit at home. At night I found another job, cleaning someone's
grass, and I made some extra money.

AP: How has the city changed since you've been here?

JW: How has the city changed? If you look around now, it's unbelievable. I read in the
Sentinel about the Windmill and all this stuff. What this council is doing here, and
how they look for the future, and how they look at business, and how those big
factories are built. I tell you, when we lived on 40, there was some farmer that lived
around the corner. Now you’ve got all these big factories over there. We just had these people over from the Netherlands, young kids. I went past M 40, and I said, there’s Haworth. I said, that was a school teacher fifty years ago when we came here. He had a little place by 16th Street, Modern Products. Look what it is now. That grew all in 45 years, that whole business. But those kids were, in my estimate, a little bit dead. You don’t want to brag about this, and that was not my plan. I wanted to just tell them how this city grew, especially the last ten years. It’s amazing. You see all those big houses around the city. It is just exploding. I saw that the last ten years. They tell me now, it goes way too fast, because you cannot go too fast, too. They say someday it’s going to be like Detroit. Then I don’t like that. I will get a little bit too busy. We are people from the country, really. When we came here, it was all quiet and nice and slow. Now it’s not. Computers and all the other things, and you build your house nice, and you’ve got to pay more tax. Why is it the guy who works hard has got to pay tax, and the guy who doesn’t want to do anything is free? They’ve got to change that. What we’ve got in this town, from 4% to 6% is a good thing. Everybody pays something, and we’ve got a little less tax. Another thing, we have our own Christian schools. We don’t brag about that, but we have to pay also for the public schools. That’s not right. We take the load from the government off, have our own schools, our own teachers, but on top of that, we’ve got to pay for the public schools. That is not 100% right. You can complain, but than they say, "Why didn’t you send them to the public?" We didn’t want to do that. I’ve got to say, this town and Zeeland, there are an awful lot of churches here.
Maybe 70, my wife says more. So it is not so that those people that go to the public school, I never will judge them, they are wonderful people, too. And those teachers are also wonderful people. But the government says, "You may not pray in that school." The government, from outside. If they could do it here, they would do it. That’s what I know, and so I do not condemn them.

AP: They used to.

JW: That’s right, there you go. They used to. That is not 100% right. If we would close all our schools, then we would pay more tax yet. So we take the load from the city of Holland for all those schools, and yet we’ve got to carry them through, too. Then they stand on strike two days before the school starts. That bugs me. They’ve got three months to do that. But the last two days, then they strike. This happened. I went to those guys, and I just said, "What is this? You’ve got three months to do this. Now the kids can’t go to school." Those things are not right. But what shall I say? I still say, I am not going to judge. I have learned to love people. I was in the hospital. There was a black girl there. They would all look down, a lot of men do that. There I see for the first time, I walk in and I go to her, I don’t know how that happened. To make it short, she said, "My husband is in jail." I sent every week a letter to jail. I love to do that. Those kids, they tell me something. I said, "When did you come here?" She said, "I came here to weeks ago from Chicago." I said, "How many kids do you have." "Three: 8, 6, and 4." I said, "What’s your husband doing?" "He is in jail," she said. I witnessed to that girl. She said, "I love the Lord." There we go. I walked just to the hospital a little while ago, and she said,
"John, what church do you go to?" That's what we have to do. I want to help people. I want to always help people. I took a little bit too much on my shoulders. I'm not a farmer anymore or a salesman, but we've got to help people and love people and pray with people.

What was your question? How is Holland now? Holland is a great place. They fixed up the roads. I wish that all the other people from outside, 16th Street, 18th Street, I wish they would clean their houses a little bit. I wish the city could do something about that. They don't have to do it like I do it here. That is not necessary. But each person should be clean. Then Holland was really something. We have that stuff coming from outside in. That's a different culture. But they're still good people. I work with all kinds of people, and Spanish people, and I love those people, they're good people. They have a different way of bringing up. They're wonderful people. It is a great town. We've got to build it up together that we get all those things out that are not right, but we do it in the right way. Dutch nature is a little strong, a little tough, comes out a little rough. English isn't clear, either. But that's your nature. Then, later on, you go back again and then you say, I didn't mean it that way, I love you people.

AP: Where did you learn English?

JW: No place. We have never learned English in school. I had seven grades, and I didn't learn it there. We came here. There were a lot of Dutch people and the church had a Dutch service, and there were a lot of Dutch people around here, and we associated with the Dutch people. We went to the factory, to Chris-Craft, and I come in the
door there, and they said, "Where you must work?" I said, "I don't know, it's a funny word." The guy says to me, "What funny word is it?" I said, "Lumberyard." Oh, he said it in Dutch to me, you've got to work outside, he said it in Dutch. So we learned. There were American people who spoke the Dutch language yet. They were born here, and they tried to help us. But it's not really good. You've got to go right into it and learn it. It takes three years to learn it and go to church. You can't understand anything. It's amen, that's the only thing. It took three years for us that we really understood. Now I feel handicapped in my English. I cannot understand it. If you right something to me, I do not know what it means, because we didn't go to school. Now my kids have it good. Now at the end, I say to myself, and my wife, too, "We sacrificed for our children." Our children say, "Dad and mom, we are so thankful that you came in this country here. This is a great country." We took them all back to the little country, and they say, "It's wonderful, dad, it's nice and clean and straight, and flowers, it's all fine. But it's so small. We love to go there for a visit, but we are so glad to go back to our country." So we have sacrificed a little bit for them, but that's alright, that's OK. So we went through these 45 years just like that. Now my wife and me sit here nicely. We've got anything we want. I will not brag about that. The Lord has blessed us abundantly. This is a great land, and we are happy to be here. You bet.

AP: So a lot more people spoke Dutch here when you got here?

JW: Yes. And also my wife's brothers were here, and there was a sister here, and they all spoke Dutch. Other people in Graafschap related to my wife, cousins and so, they
came talking Dutch to us. Here in Holland there were people there talking Dutch to me. There were some older people in our church that would still talk Dutch. They would be nice to us and so forth. There was a man that hung around me and he said, "My dad and mom went to your church." I said, "Your mom, born in this country, laid in the hospital and she had to die." I said to the minister, "Can you repeat the Dutch Psalm 116." The minister said, "No, I can't." I said, these ministers, why don't they come here by me? If these people want to die with the Dutch Psalm 116, I said, I love to do that. Then, of course, now you read the English. English is OK. That's alright. But the deep Dutch is so deep. It is a deep language. So deep and so clear. English is different. You saw and you saw and a saw and a saw. There's four saws. But one is a saw, and one is a saw, and one is I saw, it's all the same tune. So it is with saved. I'm saved from the fire, I'm saved from the water, I'm saved from the accident, I'm saved to the blood of Christ. What a low thing is that to say that. In Dutch we have only one word for that. You cannot use that word for anything in the whole language. But here, they use that holy word, saw, saw, saw... That's the way it is. Easy going. But I must also say that the English is simple, and I can better say to somebody, "I love you," than say it in Dutch. If I say it in Dutch, it is too deep. You don't say that in Dutch that way. You don't dare to say it. It's holy. The Lord is holy, but He is also friend. Jesus is my friend. That's what it is also. If we do not become like little children, we will not, then, have the Kingdom of Heaven. It says this clearly in the Book. So we've got to be humble like children. So that part of the language, and that part of going around here, for me, is simple,
and I can do it a lot better. But if I had to do it there, I'd feel all out of place, because it's too holy, too deep. Maybe Dutch, that's why we don't talk about it too much.

AP: Is that your whole family up there? [referring to large family portrait on the wall]

JW: Yes, that's my whole family. We came here with five kids and then we had two more kids here. Then they got married. We have 62 people in our own family. We were just fifty years married, and all those seven kids spoke. Can you believe that? Seven, each had a speech. The second boy, that's my wife's little kids when I came by her, he is a doctor, scholar, here. He poked a little fun. He said: 'Dad always wanted to go into business. And mom always said, 'No. If you're in business, you've got no insurance, no vacation pay, and all that.' Mom always said no. But Dad did it anyway. He bought a truck. He didn't listen to anybody, and he did it anyway. Then that truck had to be filled. Mom was right behind him, with him, all the time.'

I came here and I got homesick first. I thought, "What did I do?" I was sitting in the old, stupid furniture factory. Later I was by the boats, and I could do a lot more. But there, I was a free man, I did nothing in the winter, really. I had a farm. No cows, a farm. I was a little homesick. But we came over that. It's a great land. I wish I was young yet. Oh boy, if I was young, I would go into landscaping. My son, he is a salesman like I was. But we have big backs, so he could not do that heavy work. My other son is a superintendent of Christian schools in Phoenix. He's a salesman, too. We are all salespeople. Except the oldest. He is
the president of a factory.

AP: Your children went to Holland Christian. Did any of them go to college?

JW: Yes. They went to Calvin, the University of Michigan, Kent University. My oldest boy from my wife became doctor of psychology, so he was there in the school. Then our oldest daughter, she went to Calvin for one year, and then she met a man from California. Here we go. That guy went in his life, forty-five times back and forth in his car, Michigan to California. He brags about that. But then he became a school teacher. Then he became diabetic. Then he had five boys and they all went to school. Three are engineers. One’s a school teacher. One is in the hospital. They have good jobs. But I am surprised, when we came here, we had payments on the house, $50 a month. Christian school was $40 a month in 1951. Those grandkids buy a new house and it’s $700 a month. We can not understand that. But we had only 95 cents per hour, and those guys have a good salary because they are engineers. My other daughter didn’t go to college, but she is a teaching assistant in the public school. They asked her to be with the handicapped in Ottawa. She has the gift of being a teacher. She had no paperwork for it, but the school took her because of what she does with those kids. My son, he is a smooth talker. (tape ends)

AP: So your son works at Thermotron?

JW: Yes. He is now, at the moment, in Chicago, because somebody quit there so he’s there for three or four days. He is a perfect salesman also. But he also is landscaping. My house is nothing compared to his. He lives in a house over on Ventura Drive, and you drive up there, and it is just perfect. He loves it. He goes to
a church here and is the manager of the yard work there. That boy works too hard.

We always did, too much. He works too hard. I feel sorry for him, and the neighbors feel sorry for him. It’s amazing. Then I got another daughter, and she did not do too well. She was divorced twice, but that can happen. She is a good girl also. When I was on the road, I threw all the papers in a pile, and I am not an organizer. I only sell. She had everything ready in the book. I go to my bookkeeper and he says to me, "Who did that?" I said, "My daughter. I don't do anything. She got everything in order. This is in her." They've all got these gifts. Each has their own gifts. One son is superintendent of the school. It's amazing what the guy does, what he says. People flock around him. The youngest girl, twice she tried to be a nurse, and twice she threw the books away and she quit. One day, five years ago, she came here and she said, "Mom, before I'm going to be forty, I'm going to be an RN." We thought, "You said that before. You never made it. You're not going to make it." But we didn't say that. And she is today an RN. She loves people like me, too. She says, "The old people are in the rest home, all dried out." She was in Oklahoma, Texas, Maine, all over the place. She came home one time and she said, "I'm so thankful for you people. I don't ever want to see you in a rest home." I said, "You can say that, but we’ve got to wait and see. I don't like rest homes, either." Miracles happen all over the place. All seven kids, they’re so thankful that they are here. All of them express that, and the main thing that they express is this, that dad and mom had faith. I hope also that you have that faith.

That faith of the Father's holy faith. They said, if they didn’t have that, we wouldn’t
have that either. So they respect the Dutch line of going and keep it up. Not only to
learn, but also to express you faith in you deeds. They have seen that. That’s what
they expressed. I’m thankful for the children, this country, this city. I can tell you
stories about a young couple across the street, when they first wanted to buy the
house, I thought, maybe some funny people will come in. Then I thought, you don’t
do that. What do we have now? A couple young people that went just to Russia on a
mission, and they came here for a little while. They said, we want you to know what
we do. We’ve got Christian people here and the other side and the other side. It is
amazing. That’s why we do not go to condominium, yet. We are going to stay here
as long as we can.

AP: Has Holland changed in any other ways? What do you think of the size of the city
now?

JW: The size is a little too big. It’s getting too big. We don’t need that. It was always
so quiet, and now we’ve got all the traffic. Sometimes it’s bumper to bumper going
that way. We lived on this side, and my kids are on the north side. My wife always
said, we don’t want to go to that side, up north. The kids say, "Yeah, mom, we live
up north. It’s ten miles north." They tease her about that. My son, Jack, is always
a tour guide for Tulip Time. He loves that. He goes on these tours and talks about
us, dad and mom. My English is OK, but hers is a little bit different. He says, "We
say to our mother, 'Mom, how old are you now?' And she says, 'Sixty-seven.'
Sexty, not sixty, but sixty-seven." And the whole bus is laughing. Those little
things he tells the people, and the funny things we do as Dutch, he tells them that.
All kinds of jokes. He says, "They’ve got the wooden shoe. It says TGIF. What does that mean?" All those people look, "What does that mean, TGIF?" Nobody knows. "Come on, you know what a wooden shoe is for, you know what it is," he says, "Toes go in first." That’s only two little things of his jokes. This is a man who is that way. He got that from my wife’s family, Scherbeek, not from me.

AP: Has Tulip Time changed a lot?

JW: Well, I’ll tell you what, we have been here so long that we do not get excited about that. I can’t get excited about that, I can’t help that. They have all these things in here, and they want to put this all in the swamp. I wasn’t for it, but it was fall and there were two or three ladies and they talked Dutch, they were from Groningen. They said there is all news in the Netherlands on the TV that they will bring houses all from the Netherlands and paint here by you. "Yes," I said, "They are planting them in the swamp. What is wrong with those people." They said, "We think, too, they’re crazy. We laugh about them." 45 million. I can’t see it. We don’t need that. We don’t need a little Netherlands here.

We had never any help with English. We had to pick up English on our own. But now they cater to Spanish people. They have Spanish teachers, they’ve got to keep up the language. We are in an English speaking country. I’m an American now, and we’ve got to speak English. It bothers me a little bit that those people can’t speak write, and they don’t want to learn, and they’ve got to have a teacher in school for that. I can’t help that. We came here. We didn’t know nothing, we had no schooling. Five years, we went to Grand Haven. I couldn’t even write. I had to
write down, "I go home." There was an old judge there, and he asked me a question, and I answered the question, and we were citizens. All the seven kids were citizens because we did that. That's what they've got to do. If you come from another country, give them five years and you've got to be a citizen. Someday they're going to do that. That's not right. Everybody can come in here and talk their own language. That's not right. That's what I feel. I don't say that you've got to plant a little Netherlands here. Crazy with that. This is not the Netherlands. They don't understand, anyway, how these people live. They didn't even know what they windmill was for. Well, there are big stones in there, they grind the wheat. And then they buy a little bag of wheat. I have a story about wheat, too. During the war, I made my own. We had our own food that we ate and we cooked it in milk... Well, it's up to them what they do. Maybe they see it different than I do.

AP: Has the church changed a lot?

JW: Oh boy. Now you touched something here. I was always in that church business in the back. That's how I grew up. I was always in church. I had counseling with psychology from a lady when I had my heart business five times, she says, "John, you always end up in church." Right. The experience I had and I have. Now, I am disappointed, but I change myself, too. I am not that conservative, old-fashioned guy anymore, that we've got to say on Sunday morning, read the law. I know the form for baptism in the Dutch by heart, because I heard it a thousand times over and over. I'll tell you honestly, I am a changed person. I dare by the grace of God I to talk about people. But all these Dutch people, they are still like that. Every Sunday is
the same liturgy, the same over and over. I'm a little bit away from that. Now I work with that girl in the hospital. She just came out and she asked me the question, "Where do you go to church?" Now I start thinking, "I can't take her to my old-fashioned Central Avenue church where all the people have just about died and the benches are empty, and they stay in the same system there." That girl is joyful, black persons, they are warm. They are spiritual. They are different. They are joyful! The Dutch people, they say, "That guy didn't read the law, what's the matter with those people." I'm not that way anymore. I am changed in this land. That's why I feel not home no more in those churches, either. I don't want to dump the principles, but I rejoice at other places. But my wife is 80, and she is just a quiet person, and I don't want to bring her to these places. I was on the road, and I slept in Battle Creek, and I drove to this little place, and there was a little church there. I walked right in there, and there were all black people there. That was great. I saw two ladies in the front with a Bible in their hand, and they read it, and the guy said, "Amen!" There is life, here is life! All of a sudden, this lady says, "We've got a visitor in the back room there." I was the only white guy in the room. "Would he come to the front and introduce himself." I said, "Sure, I'll come to the front." I said, "People enjoy it here. I come from a very conservative home and church in the old country and here, too. You've got something we don't have. Maybe you need a little bit of what we have, but we need a little bit what you have. We've got to rejoice!" They said, "Amen, brother, amen!" The whole church was going on. That is what is in inside of me if you want to know exactly. Now I do not know. But I've
got to go with that girl to a church. I cannot take her to my Central Avenue Conservative Church. The benches are empty. The minister within six or seven years had 95 funerals. All the old people. But we must change a little bit. We’ve got to change. We’ve got to be free. All my kids are different than me. They are all in other places. They all go to different churches. The 8th Street theater, my daughter goes there. We were fifty years married and all the kids went there, and here I come. I said, I want to be there, too. I go in that place and sit in the front row. There were some people, "Is he here, too, that conservative man?" All of a sudden the minister was preaching and he said, "I might hurt you today, [making large arm gesture] but this is what the word says." Hey, there it comes. Joyful. Different. We go on a picnic on Sunday afternoon. I’ve got a brother-in-law who won’t do that on a Sunday. What’s wrong with that? We were all with the family in Kollen Park on a Sunday afternoon. If you want to go to the church at night, then you can do that. That’s how I feel about the church. It is not only Sunday. We’ve got to be a Christian Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday… It’s by the grace of God that I can be a Christian. Sunday morning, with my heart business, we stay at home listening to the radio. We sit together with the hymn book, my wife and me, and we enjoy it. We don’t have to be a member of the church to go the right way. What does it matter? It’s only Christ in your heart. That’s the main thing. If you know that you are a sinner and you accept Christ as your Savior and Lord, that’s the main thing. Then let your light shine. Where’s your light? If you’ve got it, you’ve got to say it. Those black people do that. I don’t know where to go with her. If I go to
Christ Memorial, and that’s a little different, than the people will think, "John goes to that church? Is he also leaving our church?" But she’s joyful. She says, "I because a Christian. I was in a real bad life. The Lord is great. Through you the Lord is great." I said, "Don’t embarrass me with this. I am nothing really." She wants to go to a spiritual place where the people are joyful. Well, you’ve got to go to Christ Memorial or something. But I just can’t, isn’t that terrible, I can’t take her to my conservative church, because it’s too old. It’s a good faith. There’s nothing wrong with the principles of Calvinism, but we’ve got to be joyful. We’ve got to be testifying people. But some people they sit there. I may not judge, but I know them by their fruits. I meat all those people all over in the hospital and I know what they think. The nurse is standing there, and here comes this lady up to me, and she says, "John, can’t you remember when you were in the hospital because of your heart?" I said, "Were you the nurse I prayed with?" "Yes," she say, "you prayed with me at ten o’clock at night." She comes over to me and hugs me and the black girl sees that, those things. The spirit. That’s what we’ve got to do, no matter where we go. We live as much as we can in faith. What am I, preaching a sermon?

AP: Have you been involved in any other organizations? We talked about your involvement at the church and the hospital.

JW: Yes, I volunteer in the hospital and Hospice. If they have the need for someone who is Dutch, then they call me and then I go there. You must never sit idle. It makes no difference how old you are. As long as your mind is OK, and you can talk, and the Lord was so great and you cannot just sit idle, you have to do what the Lord tells
you to do. I had a lady told me one time, "John, you’re full of the Holy Spirit."
That’s by the grace of God. Her husband died, and she said, "We walk with the
Lord." After fifteen years, she’s still here with a big smile on her face. "I went for
a walk this morning, but I wasn’t alone. He was with me." She had a big smile, and
she picks flowers... That’s life. That’s the Christian life. She goes to our church,
too. She knows that is a little old-fashioned. She is spiritual. She is like that, too.
And her kids are.

The church has changed completely in Holland since I am here in ’51. It’s all
little parts now. One is four parts. I see them flying this way and flying that way
and here and there all over the place. There’s no more unity. That’s what the end of
the days is. I heard a lady on the TV this morning saying those things. We live in
special times. Not to make anybody scared, but the end of times. She explained the
Old Testament. We are in that now. There’s no more sincerity and no more really
feeling that we are sinful people. There is all this love, love, love, love. Love is
there, but that’s not just that. There is more. By nature, we are sinners, and we are
saved only by grace. Washed in the blood of Christ. White as snow someday. The
future comes yet, and the best is yet to come. We’ve got to believe that. I can’t
understand all the Bible questions and the things in the Bible. It’s not my business,
either. I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He died for me on the cross. I may
tell somebody that. I say I know my Redeemer and his wondrous love to me, and the
cruel cross he suffered, and the pain of death, has made me free.

AP: What’s your impression of the split between the Reformed and the Christian
Reformed Church?

JW: That is closer together now. That does not bother me any more. That was always years ago terrible. I read these immigrant’s stories in Canada. There’s a Christian Reformed and Reformed Church there. They couldn’t talk to each other. That’s terrible. Only at the cemetery they could lay together. One time the Christian Reformed people had a youth meeting, and they said, the Reformed, we can’t have them. The Christian Reformed young people met them, they said, why don’t you come over. Then all of a sudden came the Christian Reformed and Reformed meeting, and the president said, "The heathen people came and took our promises away." Oh boy, that’s how bad it was. That was in the past, too. In the Netherlands, we went to a Christian Reformed Church. My church, they were playing cards in church. The minister would say, "Hey, could you be quiet, please, and I can preach?" That was my church. So I go sneaking to the Reformed Church, and I didn’t know my father’s friend went there. In the Reformed Church, they said, "Boy, you’re a stranger. Do you know Jesus?" What is that? They talk about Jesus here. I never heard it in mine. My father, "Don’t go there again!" I was naughty again. I went to the Baptist Church. I come and all of the sudden, the minister was preaching, he said, "You, young man who came here the first time, have you given your life to Christ?" I was so scared. They sang a song at the end and he came off the pulpit. They do that here, but there they didn’t do that. But the Baptists, they do. There was a small door to get out of that church. I was so scared, so I snuck on one side and I got out. I didn’t dare talk to the guy. My father never found out I
was there. That was in the past, but that’s all over. I have no problem with that here. Not at all. There is no difference, really. The only difference is these people don’t send their kids to a different school, of course, but the faith is the same. Exactly the same. But is the government would pay for all the schools, then a lot of Reformed people would send their kids to the Christian schools. We have some Reformed that send them to our schools, and we have some Christian Reformed kids that go to public schools. I’ve got no problem with that. People are so great here. The religion is the same. Catholic is a different story a little bit. They’re coming, too. Church history is amazing. I read all the church history. One day, I sent a letter to the Netherlands about Van Raalte. They had it wrong. It was in the Dutch paper. I read that, I was only 16 years old. I wrote a letter to the editor in the Netherlands, and I said, this is the way. Next week it was in the paper. Now we live in different times, and we must tolerate each other a little bit more, and we must be more open with each other and honest, and forget about all those different names. That’s how I feel.

AP: Are there any other things that we should talk about that we haven’t talked about?

JW: I think we went through it all quite a bit. You got a little feeling of this guy here. Do you have a feeling now of this immigrant? Do you understand me now, how I think and feel?

AP: I think so, yes.

JW: If you understand that, that is nice for you. That you know this guy’s different than the other guy. We’re all different. This is me, right, and I’ve been really soft in
what I said. I could tell a lot more and dig deep, but it takes way to long. But I hope you understood me. You can do with it what you want. But tell them what this guy went through, and tell them that he kept the faith by grace. Some people, they grab hold of materialism, and they forget the church and the whole thing. So, by the grace of God, by our Father's holy faith that is so strong, and that has never left us. But that is not because of me. That's because of God’s grace. I’ve got four sisters, who also lost a mother like me. I got just a letter from one. She does just like me. She visits the sick and talks about her faith. She has a Psalm in her letter, and I say to myself, we’re all the same. Our mother died, but before she died, she mustered a prayer, "Lord, keep my children in your hands." The whole family’s like that. I was always with my sisters in prayer. I got a letter from my sister, she was 68, and she told me what I did. I was ten years old, and I stood by those beds, and sung a song, and we had prayer. Can you believe it? I forgot that.

See why I wanted to immigrate? There was so much friction in the churches. You couldn't go here, you couldn't go there, and all that. Then already I felt it. All the things that were happening at home, there must be a better country. I tell you, that better country is here. Nothing is perfect. Remember that. It's not perfect there, but not perfect here, either. So it’s great, and I’m glad that we’re here now. Don’t forget that witnessing, because that’s the main thing. Seek ye first the kingdom, and all the other things will come. This is the main thing, how we live. Saved in the arms of Jesus, that's my main story. I can talk about it all the time. In the night, I wake up and talk to my wife, and I pray and I struggle. I say, "Lord,
how long must I wait."

In life, I see so much danger and sin and trouble with families, even church families. That bothers me so much. I want to help them sometimes, but then I try too hard, and I can't. They are so stubborn. They can't forgive each other. But if they can't forgive each other, Christ does not forgive you. And the end of that, you know what that is. The Book says it clearly, "If you can't forgive your neighbor, I can't forgive you either." There's a lot more. I tell you, if I would have run the road which I think I should have run, I think I would have went too deep through it. Maybe the Lord kept me away from that. Some pastors, some ministers, they take so much on their shoulders. You can't do that. They told me already that I do that, so I had to back off a little bit. I pray for so many people. And for you, too. I thank you that you are here, and I hope you know Christ as your Savior. Shall we pray together? Is that funny if we do that?

AP: No.

JW: Our Father in heaven, we thank you so much for the blessings that Thou has given. Oh lord, Thou has bought us with a price from the beginning, even before the foundation of this world, Thou, oh Lord, has known us. We do not understand that. But we know that we have the great desire to be with Thy people. Oh Lord, if Thy people love Thee, we love each other. So we thank Thee that Thou has been our Savior, and that we can rest in Thee, and we can confess our weaknesses and our pain, and our tears, and Thou will gather all our tears in Thy bottle. Oh Lord, we thank Thee for the future which Thou has laid away for Thy people, a new heaven and a new earth, within righteousness may dwell. May we then, as Christians, Thou
has given us a gift of Thyself, as Christians, may we testify about that faith to someone else. May we lay a hand on the shoulders of our children and grandchildren, and our friends, and may we say, "Come, let us walk with Christ ourselves." In the storm of life, also be with this young lady, Lord, strengthen her faith, also. Be with her, that she may make the right decisions, and that she may serve Thee in her life. If she has a friend, we do not know, but if, Lord, may they walk together. May they walk with Thee and talk with Thee, and Thou will mold them and guide them and lead them if they only trust and obey. So hear our prayer. We thank Thee again for this wonderful, wonderful day. For this great day, that was given us health and strength, and there was given us friends and partners, and there was given us so many people surrounding us who serve Thee and who love Thee. Lord, together we can sing the great song of redemption. We are saved by grace. Hear our prayer now, we pray, for Christ's sake, Amen.

AP: Amen. Well, I think we can probably wrap up now. Thank you very much for spending the time this afternoon.

JW: You are so welcome.