

Dutch Oral Interview – Rein and Kay Wolfert

Tuesday, October 6th, 1998

Cathy Wemette: Okay, we're going to start real easy. If I can get each of you to state your full names and birth dates.

Rein Wolfert: Okay, my name is Rein Wolfert and I was born [date removed], 1939.

Kay Wolfert: I'm Kaye Wolfert and I was born [date removed], 1939 in the Netherlands.

CW: Okay...

RK: And I was born also in the Netherlands.

CW: Where did each of you grow up in the Netherlands? Did you grow up where you were born?

RW: I was born in Marienberg and lived there for six years and then I moved to Almelo, the town that Kay lives in and I lived there until I was 21. Then I moved back and forth a lot, but that's where I was living most of the time.

CW: (to Kaye) And you just stayed in the town where you were born, correct?

KW: I stayed in Almelo; lived in Almelo until I moved away to here.

CW: Could you briefly describe you life there before you emmigrated here? What was it like living there?

RW: okay, the first years were of course during the war, and they have a sound impact on our lives, I'm sure but we didn't know any better, because we were born in '39, and the war started shortly after that, lived with it. Went through some rough times. My father was killed during the war, and then I moved to Almelo, that's where I went to school, and took the career that I wanted. I went into the agricultural area. That's why I moved quite a bit during this time. And then in 58 I went into the service, 'til 60. Then shortly after, I was 21years old and I moved to the United States.

KW: The same as with Rein, I lived in Almelo, went to school in Almelo. Became a secretary until I left for the United States. We both turned 21, as a matter of fact, in the United States. Rein came in May, and I came in November the same year, 1960.

CW: 1960? Well you answered my next question then, which is when did you come here. What were your main reasons for deciding to immigrate?

RW: Okay, my main reason was to become a farmer here in the United States. At that time in the Netherlands it was difficult to get a farm. So I moved to the United States,

did some farming for two years, up north in Montague, but it wasn't like what I pictured I to be. It was a difficult time in farming. There was an overproduction, so we were all into the crops, milk wasn't pushed like it was in the Netherlands, so it wasn't much fun to do that sort of farming, so I got out of it and went into the construction, did that for two years, and then I decided to go back to school and get a degree, and then I taught for thirty years here at Holland High school.

CW: What did you teach?

RW: I taught German and Social studies.

CW: Neat. What about you? (to Kay) What was your main reason for coming here?

KW: Oh, my main reason was my friends and their parents left when I was 14, and I told them that I wanted to go to the United States. And then I met Rein and it was perfect, because he wanted to go, so we ah, started our papers, but he had started a little bit earlier than I did. So you had to go by number, and my number came up in November, so when I left first, or when I first came to the United States, I tried to get a job as a secretary, but there were not many jobs here. So then I worked at Pine Rest for a year to see if I maybe liked nursing, but I didn't like that too much, either. So I went back to school in Muskegon, we got married, had a family, and then I started Hope College-that was later in life. I went there for about two years, I even did a semester as a TA-didn't like it. I just did not like to go into teaching. So then I went to Grand Rapids Junior College to get my degree, my associates degree. It was very hard to keep going to school, because our parents were still living, well, my mother was still living. My father passed away and then I tried to go there as often as I could. Sometimes, I would take off from school. First I worked first at Padnos, as an administrative assistant, then I worked at the bank as a teller Then we went back to the farm to try that out, to see how that worked out. But, we decided to go back to the city.

CW: So you're city people?

KW: Yes, so then we started the Bed and Breakfast called the Centennial Inn two years ago; the former Netherlands Museum.

RW: We started our first Bed and Breakfast, when our children had left the house, we changed the house on the north side to a Bed and Breakfast to see if we would like it. And we had three rooms. It's very interesting work because you meet so many different types of people. Then this property became for sale, we thought it was a perfect location for a bed and breakfast so we went, I should say Kay went after it-I was still teaching and coaching-and we were very fortunate to buy it, and it was a lot of work. It was a dump, really. (Rein laughs)

CW: It's beautiful now...

RW: And then we opened up this bed and breakfast on the third of May in 1996. And now I am retired. Full time Inn keeper.

CW: Wow, so you guys have kind of been all over. Could you describe the trip over here?

RW: To me it was an exciting trip, because I was on a boat in May and there were a lot of students on that boat returning from Europe. But we had a big storm, and a lot of people became seasick. I was very fortunate to not become sea sick, so we could eat anything we wanted to. There was lots of food. And you had twenty-five hour days because we were trying to make up with the time changes. That was kind of unique. So I had a great time. Then I arrived in New York and the only thing that I still remember, that I will never forget in my life coming from Europe that I bought the train ticket and I asked when the next train was leaving – (their daughter comes home and remarks that something smelled good) that’s my daughter, our daughter – and I had to wait eighteen hours for the next train. Being from Europe, that was...ahh... “what? Eighteen hours I have to wait for a train? That was almost like a whole day. So then I took a train and came over here.

KW: I went on the Statendam, that was a cruise ship – I was lucky to get that seat because there was only one place left, so I got it. And it was very nice, but I was alone on the ship, so it would’ve been better if we’d both been on that, on the ship. But it was okay, and the same happened to us, then the train in Buffalo had to wait -was that Buffalo?

RW: Yes, it was Buffalo - you had to transfer.

KW: It was really strange – I couldn’t believe it. Then when I arrived in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

RW: Wait, you should explain that better. The train coming from New York was late, and the train from Buffalo going to Detroit and then so on, actually just waited for over an hour for the other train to arrive. And there were all these things you had to learn as a European. “Wait a minute...”

KW: But then when I arrived in Grand Rapids, it was *the worst*. Because I thought we had ended up in the boonies somewhere. I just was shocked about America. I mean, it was, where we ended up, it looked to me like a war-torn place or something, I don’t know... it was in Grand Rapids. It actually was too, wasn’t it?

RW: The sad part of it is, you know you travel by train or by the bus companies, and the stations are always in the worst parts of the cities. And that’s the sad part. You don’t realize that when you arrive here. You always end up in downtowns, and especially in the sixties and so on, it wasn’t very picturesque.

KW: It was a very scary thing. So I could not believe it. I said, "Ah no, this is not America, it can't be. I want to go back home." You know? And then there was actually no train station. It was just an open building. There was no pavement, there was nothing. It was just terrible. Yeah, the only thing that I liked was Rein's car. He had a nice car. A big car (they both laugh).

CW: What kind of car was it?

RW: It was a '56 Chevy.

KW: And it was kind of interesting. Then we went to the farm, and the farm was in the boonies, too, in Montague. So I just did not know what I had started here. There were a few stores and it was way far away and we did not have the highways that we have now. So it took a long time to go from Grand Rapids to Montague –

RW: Hour and a half probably...

KW: And now you can do it so fast. It was an experience, interesting, but not to be repeated. But I'm glad we did it anyway.

CW: Yeah? Would you ever choose to go back there if you could?

RW: We love to go back there. You never forget your roots. And when we left, we were one of the last ones to leave the Netherlands also. We jokingly said that we almost turned off the lights for immigration, because after that, immigration almost completely stopped. A lot of people left before us, because either they were afraid. They said within another twenty years we're going to have another war in Europe, due to a pattern and they didn't want their children to go through that again, or something similar to that, and in the 1960's Europe started to look a little better, and there were more opportunities at that time, so not that many were leaving. And we love to go back, our families live there, I have one sister here, but Kay doesn't have any. All her brothers and sisters are in the Netherlands. And ah...so that was some of the things that you have to be aware of. But I couldn't live there anymore. You're used to the area here, your children live here, you have your friends here, you lived most of your life here. So you know, your roots have changed.

KW: Just because we can go back. WE want to go back ,we go back.. It's easy now. We can just fly. It's nice to see the family, it's great to be there. But it's also very nice to go back home to the States. And the family comes to visit us from over there.

CW: Do they? They come to stay at your bed and breakfast?

KW: Yeah, yeah.

CW: Why did you choose to come here in the United States?

RW: You mean Holland, Michigan?

CW: Yeah.

RW: That was just coincidental.

CW: Really?

RW: I came to Montague to, ahh...(the phone rings) we should answer that. Okay, coming back to where we are...

KW: You applied for a job...

RW: No first of all, we came, when you come to the United States, you needed a sponsor in those days, and the person up north in Montague, sponsored me. So that's the reason we ended up in Montague, Michigan. It could have been Minnesota where you live. Then when I decided to go back to school again, I started at Grand Valley State college, which is a school, a little ways from here, that just started up and looked intriguing to me, because it was small and you got personal attention, which is what I think I was looking for. And when I was finished with my education to become a teacher, it was wide open. At that time, you could start at different places. I had four job offerings, but the reason that I came to Holland, Michigan, the Holland Public Schools is because they were at that time the leaders of education in Michigan. They were very outstanding and a well-known school. I was very impressed with them. And luckily they were impressed with me. I don't know why, but they were. So I took over the German program at Holland High, and it was quite successful. We kept the program going, even though many schools dropped the German programs, we didn't – we built it up. Until the crunch came in the last five or six years. It really got difficult. That's the reason we came to Holland. We stayed, we like Holland, and the community. Now Kay likes it, but she better explain it now. What you thought of Holland, now and...

KW: Yeah, see when I came, the Christian Reform Church was my sponsor. I came to Grand Rapids first, and had to move in with Dutch people, who have remained our friends. I actually did not know them, but my now sister-in-law had to move out of her house and move in with them. We had a lot in common. Because our cities were close – 15 or so miles apart. But she then moved in and so I had to move in too, because we didn't have a home, and then later on, I moved to Muskegon, and from there...

RW: Then we got married.

KW: Yeah, then we got married...

RW: After two years.

KW: And then we lived there for a while and came to Holland. NO, we went to Grand Rapids first, and then we came to Holland. But when I came to Holland, it was terrible.

When we first came, we used to go to the camping area here, it was so conservative, I hated it.

CW: Really?

KW: Ahh, I couldn't stand it. It was just so different from what we were used to.

CW: How so?

KW: In everything. I mean, a whole different atmosphere. Now it's not Holland anymore. It's really different. It was too strict, everything was too strict.

RW: To agree with what Kay is trying to say, it's too Dutch oriented, close-knit society. That's what it came down to. I'm not saying that negatively, but it was the Dutch-knit close society from the upper parts of the Netherlands. Different again, from where we came from. Their views at that time, they were anywhere from twenty to thirty years behind. And it's still that way, but now we're used to it. Now when we go back to the Netherlands...

KW: We're called conservative.

RW: You can't keep up with it. They're always ahead of us on many of the issues and so on. We have some interesting discussions.

KW: It was very hard. Plus there was nothing to do in Holland. All we had was the beach you know? And it was just... Whatever we wanted to do, we had to go to Grand Rapids. Oh yeah, I had to do my shopping for many, many years in Grand Rapids. And finally, didn't we get the first theater? Oh no, first we got the mall, and then we got the theater, and then we got the outlet mall, so but when we got the mall, I was so happy, I couldn't believe it. I thought, oh now it has to grow. And it did, and now it's great.

CW: Yeah, it is.

KW: For me, the growth may stop. This is okay. This is great. You know, it's a nice little town. And it's a safe town. It's great to raise a family and every time, where ever we go, we're always happy to go back to Holland. We get back home and we're "Oh, it's great to live in Holland." Very nice. And it's nice to have the Dutch ancestry here.

CW: Tell me a little bit about your family and what it was like to raise a family in a country that you weren't raised in? Was that difficult at all?

RW: Yeah, it always creates problems. A lot of people don't realize that, especially when they're outsiders, because you bring two cultures together. And the children are brought up in that type of society. They are different, they have a different view on life than, since we're in the American society, what an American child would have. And that created some problems. We didn't realize that until Mary Lou was in the second or third grade, something like that. They were looked at as outsiders a little bit. You get a little

bit of a discrimination factor. And it was very apparent when we came to Holland. It even became a little stronger. But they have overcome that, but the interesting part is that most of them went to Calvin College. They associated themselves more with the Canadians, more than they did with the Americans, they felt more at home with them. So, there is always that cultural difference that you are looking for, and even the first immigrant kids have that. I think that the second generation will not have it any more, so then it is taken care of. They're still torn sometimes, between two cultures. Plus, they go back to the Netherlands sometimes, and they see their cousins, and I think that is where the hang-up is.

KW: The kids love to go to Europe.

CW: I'm sure...

KW: It's just the nicest. To be with the family, you know. It's great. Most of them speak English, especially the cousins. And the kids speak Dutch, so it's nice, it really is wonderful.

CW: How many children do you have?

RW: We have four. Three girls and a boy. Mary Lou is the oldest, Amy and Audrey our twins are second, and Pete our son, is the youngest. Do you need some information about them too?

CW: NO, just my own curiosity...

RW: That's okay.

CW: Now you mentioned a sponsor, (to Kay) you said you said your sponsor was the Christian Reform Church, (to Rein) who was your sponsor?

RW: the farmer I worked for. He also guaranteed that I would have a job. You had to have those things. You have to have a guarantee of a job and a place to stay. And those two were both combined at once.

CW: (to Kay) And you were a secretary when you first came? You were set up with a secretarial job?

KW: Yes. Did I get a job as a secretary right away?

CW: Yes.

KW: Oh no. There were no jobs here. It was very hard to find a job. Then I ended up working at Pine Rest. I don't know if you've ever heard of...

RW: You actually did not have guaranteed job when you came here...

KW: No...

RW: You were only sponsored.

KW: yeah , but I guess I knew I could get a job, I don't know.

RW: Maybe there was a little more discrimination at that time. Who knows? Not any more.

KW: No, I was just not afraid that I could not get a job. I used to work for an American Company in the Netherlands.

CW: Really? What type of work did you do there?

KW: Secretarial work. IT was a company that's called Reading Textile Machines Works, a very nice company to work for. It was an international company.

RW: Pennsylvania.

KW: Yeah, out of Pennsylvania. So I worked for that company. Yeah, I thought that I could get a job any time, but it was hard. And then I worked at Pine Rest as a Nursing assistant, and that was very difficult, because I had never met anyone who was mentally ill. So here you get thrown into a hospital that has nothing but. There were a lot of Dutch people, and they spoke Dutch, so it was fun for me, too.

CW: That would be neat. When you first came here, did you hook up with a lot of people from the Netherlands? I mean, did you search people out?

KW: Well, like I said, I moved into the house of a Dutch couple – a young couple – and his brother was also on the way. His plane flew over my ship, so he arrived a day earlier than I. Also my sister-in-law she was here already...when did she come?

RW: 1959. The year before that, March 1959.

KW: Same year, wasn't it? March 1960.

RW: Yeah, 1960.

KW: Then his whole family, his parents came, of the family that I stayed with. That whole family immigrated from the Netherlands. Father, Mother...

RW: Eleven children.

KW: Yeah, all of them together, they have eleven children. SO they all came here. And we're still friends. It's like one big family now.

CW: That's really neat. What educational background did you both have coming over here?

RW: I think it would probably be equivalent to two years of college by the time we got here. The schooling is a little different in Europe, but you are probably aware. You make a decision very early...I went into the agricultural area, and Kaye went more into the secretarial work. But you go beyond high school...That's where we were.

KW: But yours was a very good education, Rein.

RW: Yes...

CW: Do you feel it prepared you pretty well for what you encountered over here?

KW: Yes.

RW: Yeah, the challenges that we had here, were not that difficult to overcome. I think you had an advantage – the later immigrants had a better knowledge of the language. We spoke English, and that makes a lot of difference. If you listen to the older immigrants, they actually learned English here, and that makes a tremendous difference. Like the incident in New York where we had to wait for eighteen hours. What do you do? You put your suitcases in your locker and you walk around New York, and I had a good time for eighteen hours. I mean, you buy some bananas, or something, and you look over the city. I still remember that very well.

KW: I did not have to wait eighteen hours, though.

RW: No, you didn't have to wait eighteen hours?

KW: No, but it was a long time.

CW: (to Kay) So did you go explore New York? (Kay shakes her head) No you didn't?

RW: You did not go out of Central Station?

KW: We were on the train, but we waited with the train...that is so weird, too. I can't actually remember that much any more. All I know is that it was a long ways. That's strange... But that was an eye-opener.

CW: (to Kay) Now you had mentioned that your first impression was terrible. (to Rein) What was your first impression?

RW: The...I have to be careful how I say this...it sounds negative, but...I felt that the United States was – You get this picture of the United States being *the* country in the world, the richest, and this and that. And when you come here, it's not true. You know,

we're behind in many aspects. And a lot of people, well, you can't say that either to Americans. They get very upset, so we keep our mouths shut. I remember then on the farm they had a telephone that had six people on the same line. You had to ask permission to use the line – maybe you can remember, or your father or mother probably remember – you had to ask permission to get on the line, and I thought to myself, what is going on here?

KW: Oh you mean six different families?!?

RW: Yeah, on the same line. Six different farms, you know. “Can I interrupt for a minute? We have to call the veterinarian; it's kind of important.” And then, “Okay, go ahead.” And then the train system, and all of that. You got kind of a strange feeling of “is this the United States? Is *this* the United States?”

KW: And the buses...

RW: And you know, the houses all being made out of wood construction was another thing that really hit you in the eye. Because in Europe, everything is made out of stone and will last forever. And other things...but I really liked the people, liked the country.

KW: The people were great.

RW: Yeah, still today, an American person is very friendly. We have the wrong picture about that in Europe. We kind of have the ugly American picture. I mean, it's getting better now. But when I was teaching German, I said give me the picture of an American, and they said, “okay, multi-cultured, chewing gum, two or three cameras...” and that's not really true. And now I say, give me a typical picture of a German, and they say “Okay, leiderhosen...” and see, so we do the same thing.

KW: The Dutch customs – oh that was another thing when we came here...this Dutch festival (they both laugh).

CW: Yeah, tell me about that. What was that like to experience?

RW: Well, the first time in 1961, it was hotter than blazes that day, I remember that, too. And we saw the dancers and that... I do appreciate it, and I think it's unique and different-

KW: Oh we love it now.

RW: And we love it. A lot of people think that it is typical Dutch and it is not. It's typical Holland, Michigan. That's what it is. It's a tourist attraction and people have to look at it that way. You know, it's different. But it's neat that they're proud. A lot of things that have bettered themselves now. People are now proud to be called Dutch, when we came in the beginning, we met a lot of people that kind of hid the fact that they were Dutch. They were German, or whatever...now there's a real movement again.

KW: We could never figure that one out. We said, "Man you're Dutch? Speak up! You're Dutch!" I couldn't believe it.

RW: Now I meet a lot of people that I translate letters for because they're trying to find their relatives in the Netherlands. They make trips, and it's neat to see that. And I see that happening to Germans, too. So there is more of a closeness coming into the town. So it's kind of neat.

CW: But Tulip Time is okay now?

KW: I love Tulip Time now. But in the beginning, I just thought that it was so old fashioned. I don't know what it was, but I thought-

RW: Well it is. It's like the Netherlands was a hundred years ago.

KW: Yeah, like maybe four hundred years ago (they both laughed). But like the Tulips were gorgeous. I had never seen so many tulips in my life, in the Netherlands. I don't know why...

RW: Well, we didn't live in that area.

KW: No, we didn't live in that flower area. But it was so beautiful. But no, gosh, I could not believe the costumes people wore.

RW: It has gotten better...

KW: Oh, it's a lot nicer now. Tulip Time has changed a lot. It's just great. Yeah, it was just getting used to wearing that costumes. We did it, what, one year?

RW: Yeah, one year...

KW: But I felt very uncomfortable, because we never wore the costumes in the Netherlands. I said, "I am never doing this again." I just felt like a freak, almost. People come and watch you and take pictures and "Do you walk with wooden shoes in the Netherlands?" "No, we don't." "You don't?!? Then how come you wear them now?" "Oh, because this is the Tulip Time Festival." But yeah, it was very hard to do that.

Unfortunately, due to a malfunction with the tape-recorder, the rest of the interview is indistinguishable...