

Jan. 23, 1977

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LIGTVOET

T: Hi. What is your name?

J: My name is John Ligtoet.

T: Would you tell me something about your life in the Netherlands.

J: Yes, at the age of 12 I worked in a barber shop in my home town for 3 years. Then I left town and worked in another city for 2 years. And from there I came to the U.S.. I was 17 when I came to the U.S. all by myself. The rest of my family stayed in the Netherlands.

T: Why did you come to the United States?

J: Well, this certain man whom I had worked for in the Netherlands wrote to me and told me of the conditions in the United States. He kind of invited me or urged me to come to the United States. I came to Grand Rapids and worked in a barber shop for 3 years. Then I left Grand Rapids and went to Wisconsin and I worked there for 3 years. Then I came to Holland, Michigan.

T: How big was Holland in those times?

J: I would say about 12,000 inhabitants. I started a barber shop on eighteenth street and stayed there until about 2 years ago. I worked there a little over 50 years. Then because of my health I had to retire.

T: Did you own the barber shop?

J: No, I owned the business but not the building.

T: Oh, did you make alot of money?

J: The business at first of course. I had to work it up. There were times that I didn't do so well and there were times when I did very well.

T: Did the customers ever get mad?

J: Well, of course you can not satisfy everyone. I always tried to do the best I can and I gained many really, I'd almost say friends, who came reguarly. Even now that I am retired, I probably shouldn't say so, because I am not allowed to work in the basement. But I have a place fixed up in the basement so some of the real old men and acquaintances come once in a while to get a hair cut.

T: How old are you?

J: I will be 85 years old in March.

T: You're still working, that's really nice.

J: Like I said, I started at the age of 12 at the barber shop and I worked almost 72 years as a barber.

T: How did you become a barber?

J: Well, shortly before we graduated from school, the superintendent of the school came around and asked us boys what kind of work we intended to do. I had already made up my mind that I was going to be a barber. I told him so, and that is why when I got out of school I started to work as a barber. You see, we only have 6 years of schooling but that was 6 years of class work. Those days there were no sports of any kind. You went to school at 9 o'clock and you were in the class room until 12 o'clock. You went home to dinner and back to class at 10 o'clock. You were in the class room until 4 o'clock. We had 3 weeks vacation in the summer time and we had one week during christmas time. That was all the vacation that we had.

T: Oh, you studied alot.

J: So you can well imagine that although we only went 6 years to school, we had at least 10 years of school work. Compared with what they have here.

T: How do you manage the house? I see that you are alone. Do you live alone here?

J: I have lived alone for 13 years. My wife died in about 13 years ago. I have taken care of the house work and my own cooking all during these years.

T: Oh, you do a very good job of it. I can see that it is a beautiful house inside.

J: Well my wife was a good house keeper and I think that I got it from her. Yes, I can cook and I can bake.

T: Oh, that's really neat. Have you gone back to the Netherlands?

J: I have never been back to the Netherlands.

T: Oh no. Would you like to?

J: Well, I am a home body. I don't like to leave home. I am the only one left of the family. That is of brothers and sisters and folks. The rest of them all have died. One of the oldest sisters died about 3 years ago. She was 89 then.

T: Have you had any contact with your family?

J: One of my neices of my oldest sisters' daughter. She was here with a group of people from the Netherlands, staying in Grand Rapids with a singing group you see. While she was in Grand Rapids she called me and asked me what my name was and then she told me that her mothers' name was Hooper. That was my older sisters' name after she got married. So then I told her, your mother was my sister and she was very much surprised. She tried to give me her address. I could not understand her, I could understand all of the other questions that she asked. But that I could not understand. So she said I will write you

a letter. She wrote me a letter and then I got the address and I wrote her back. I have not received an answer yet, because that was only 3 or 4 weeks ago that I got her letter.

T: Do you speak Dutch with her?

J: Yes, I talk Dutch with her.

T: Do you often talk Dutch?

J: No, I don't get the opportunity you see. But she was surprised after all these many years that I could speak the Dutch language as good as I did.

T: You really don't forget your language. Do you have friends that come and visit you?

J: Well, I have only a very few. One of my close friends whom I'd say, her folks used to be living where you're living now. Her husbands' folks used to live on the right side. They are younger, they are about 17 years younger. But, every so often they invite me for an evening. You see, and we have an evening together.

T: Do you feel lonely sometimes?

J: Well, while I was still in the barber shop, not so much because I have communication with people who came in my shop you see. But after I had to retire, which I didn't like to do, but on account of my health I had to do; So, I have times in the evening that are lonesome. & I like to read and that helps.

T: Did you cut hair?

J: Yes, cut hair and shave and at one time I had quite a number of lady customers. Years ago they didn't have the beauty parlors like they have now. So ladies came to the regular barber shops to get their hair cut. I used to do quite a bit of it.

T: Were the women too fussy?

J: We take the average lady that came to my barber shop was very easily satisfied. Of course I always try to do as good as I could.

T: What was the more regular work that you do?

J: The regular work was usual, you would have done more shaving than anything else. But your hair cutting was well, people did not come so often for a hair cut. Shaving men would come some two or three times a week and others only once a week. I suppose it was according to their earnings. Of course a business man would come more often than the ordinary worker.

T: Did you ever make a mistake when you cut someone's hair?

J: Well, like I say, we started to work as an apprentice in the barber shop. We did mostly what we call the lathering of the

face with the soap on and then the boss would do the shaving. That way we watched how it was done and gradually some of the men would say, you shave me. That way we learned. Then of course like your father or relatives would say go ahead and do it.

T: Were you nervous the first time that you did it?

J: Well, no you had to use the razor to sharpen it. You know and so you got used to handling it. When it comes to cutting there were very few that I cut.

T: Did they get mad?

J: Well, I tell you like I say there are differences in people, some of them just say well it is an accident, others would be a bit angry you see.

T: Can you remember something funny?

J: No, I never had much trouble that way.

T: That radio it's beautiful. Is it an antique?

J: Yes, it's quite old, it is a radio and a record player.

T: You bought it here?

J: Yes, I bought it here. My wife seems to have very good taste of furniture. Somebody told me a while ago that the radio and that cabinet are worth money.

T: Yes it is an antique.
Your wife was from Holland, Michigan?

J: My wife was born in Amsterdam, Netherlands. I met her in Grand Rapids.

T: How far was your hometown from Amsterdam?

J: I was born in the city of Harlem. I would say approximately 12 miles from Amsterdam. But 12 miles in those days was a long way.

T: Tell me about your hometown in the Netherlands?

J: The city of Harlem is a town of well I would say about almost like Grand Rapids. Not quite that large and it is a district where all of these tulips and hyacinth bulbs came from. They come and order these from a place near

T: What did your father do for a living?

J: My father worked in a distillery. He was a foreman there and three days a week he went out to get orders. . . I have two children, a son and a daughter. My daughter is married to . . . her husband's name is Jerry Backs. He is the administrator of

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a veteran facility in Grand Rapids, where they have 700 or more old soldiers. Some are old or some are crippled and so on. He is the administrator of that place.

T: Do you go to visit them sometimes?

J: No, not very often.

T: Do they have children?

J: No, they have no children.

T: And your son?

J: My son has two children. His daughter is 18 years old and his son is 12 years old. And he is a professor of chemistry.

T: Oh, here in Holland?

J: No, in Dearborn, Michigan. He has worked. . . taught in the same college for the last 20 years. He worked. . . taught 5 years in the high schools but he has been 20 years in this place. His daughter is going to graduate this coming June from high school this year.

T: Did you build this house?

J: My wife's brother was in the real estate business and he had it built for us. That was his idea, you know, I was renting. And he said that it would be nice to have a home of your own, so, we decided to have our own home.

T: Is it a two story house?

J: It has three bedrooms upstairs and you may say a toilet room upstairs and here a complete bathroom, downstairs.

T: Oh! It is not a two family house?

J: No, we did not build it for two families. After all we could rent out rooms upstairs but I prefer to live this way.

T: Can you rent for tulip time?

J: No, no it means extra work, you know, and you of course, never know whom you get or what you get.

T: Yeah, that's true.

J: How long does your tape work?

T: We still have a little bit on this side. This is for 60 minutes.

J: Oh, for an hour?

T: yes, 30 for one side and 30 for the other.

T: Where did you live before here?

J: I only lived a year here on eighteenth street, right in the same neighborhood.

T: Was there another school?

J: There was our old school then. I haven't got the picture of it, but my son-in-law took the picture just before they started to tear it down. It was, of course, a two story building.

T: It was a wood building?

J: No, bricks! . . . Ah! There were 5 houses from this house to the school ground. The school bought those houses. There are three houses on twentieth street.

T: What did you feel when you saw the school down?

J: Well, you know I was not used to seeing that. My children went to school there. But they got a beautiful school right now. They got a big play ground which they didn't have before.

T: What do you do at tulip time?

J: Well, I used to go to the parade, you know, and enjoy seeing the parade, still enjoy seeing the parade but well, of course the way they have it this year with all that rain, you know, I stayed home.

T: Does tulip time remind you of home?

J: No, because in the Netherlands, they didn't make so much of it. It was a business there, you see, they didn't have a tulip time like we have here. The parades or anything of that kind because it was a business, you see.

T: Do you fish?

J: No, I'm not a sportsman.

T: Has your house always been like this, or did you have it remodeled?

J: No, we used to have a dining room and a living room, but later we combined them in one. The only change we had made was, we bought a different sink in the kitchen. The houses were made this way in those days, you see, There are more houses built practically the same as this, only they have partial partitions, you see. Standing up like this, but we had built it like this. (He stood up to show.)

T: What year did you come to Holland?

J: I came to Holland, Michigan in 1724, November 1724. And so we moved to this house probably in the early part of the '26.

T: Did you go to the army?

J: No, during World War I. I was only married and I was in

Kenosha, Wisconsin then. They have plenty of young men who were not married who were drafted and so I escaped from the army. But my son was in the service during W.W.II. almost three years ^{in the} and a few months. And my son-in-law was in the service, I think three years or longer than three years.

T: We still have some tape but we better change it. Were you worried about your son?

J: My son went from this country to France and they worked as a military group. They went from France to the Netherlands, then into Germany and then to Belgium you see, and they were there till the end of the war. My son-in-law was in the medical corps. He was in Italy, Africa, and then Italy.

T: What did you tell your son when he told you he had to go to war?

J: Well, of course, everybody else has to go, so he was no exception. Of course, during the time that they were over in Europe and battle, we were often concerned because the war was so severe that you were often thinking of them.

T: Did he write to you?

J: Oh, yes when ever he had an opportunity but he never wrote about the battles.

T: How many people have moved from here?

J: This block has changed very much. Many people have moved and of course many have passed away in these many years. Living here since 1726, you can well imagine in 50 years time, lots of people have moved and also have passed away.

T: Has that affected you?

J: Well of course, you miss a lot of those folks. We had very nice neighbors here. Many people moving, and of course now they are all strange and I think people are busy today too. They either . . . well, they go places or else they are interested in t.v. and so on and that keeps them at home too.

T: Do you like t.v.?

J: No, I have a t.v., not in this room I have it in the bedroom. But all the news I get there on the radio. I think that's the way I feel. Of course, people feel different then I do, but I think it is a waste of time to sit around and just look at pictures. Ya! When you sit and television, you can't do anything else. Yes! My grandson likes to watch those football games, baseball games, and all these different sports, and he enjoys looking at them, of course, he is young.

T: When you were younger, did you go to parties here in Holland?

J: No!! No, we were usually home, me and my wife were at home and well satisfied you see. Today people are different, they are not staisfied at home any more. They want to go places,

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you know and I never was much for sports. If I had beer, of course, probably going to baseball games or something like that but I. . . well in a barber shop, you work from 7 o'clock in the morning till 8 Or 9 o'clock at night and on Saturday you work almost till midnight. Well, the morning man works till 6 o'clock and if they want to get a shave or hair cut you have to come after 6 o'clock and the business people came during the day.

T: In the barber shop did you have a helper?

J: No, I always worked alone, except when I was in Wisconsin, then I had somebody working with me. But otherwise since I came to Holland, I always worked alone.

T: How big was your barber shop?

J: The barber shop was not a very large place. I doubt. . . if you have gone over to the eighteenth street back of the mini mart, you know, that is a small building, and I was in that building for over 50 years.

T: What did you have in the barber shop?

J: Just a barber chair and the regular waiting chairs, you know, and then I have a cover and a stand in front of the barber chair where I had my tools on.

T: Did you cut hair with scissors?

J: Scissors and first a hand clipper and later on electric clipper. The hand clipper. . . I don't know if I have one here (He went to a desk and looked in a drawer.) this is the hand clipper that I used to use it worked this way, (demonstrates), and this one I took along from the Netherlands.

T: Do they work?

J: This is a small one, later on we had used larger ones and of course this would be an antique to other people.

T: They are in perfect condition.

J: It was all hand work then when I first started to work in a barber shop.

T: Did you cut hair of children?

J: Children? Oh yes, (laughs), and someone very hard to cut because they holler like ow!, (laughs)!!

T: But most of your clients were adults?

J: Yes, altho the people in those days didn't cut their children's hair and so they came with them to the barber shop and sometime I had very young ones who were afraid and later on when you got the electric clipper they were still more afraid because of the noise.

T: Who was the first one?

- J: Oh, I don't know!! Some fights really fight, the mother or father just used to have to hold them down.
- T: Were adult people afraid of the electric clippers too?
- J: No, no. Well I can't say that, because gradually they got used to well. . . to seeing them you see. They had different ones. Today they just have a long cord and a clipper on it. You know like years ago they had a regular stand where the clipper would hang on. I have one like that one there. It's still in working condition but the time rhythm that you have with the cord is somewhat easier to handle, you see, I'm sure we can find another one. (he went downstairs to bring the electric clipper.) The cord is cut off but is in perfect condition if the cord is on. (At this point John shows me how to operate the electric clipper he brought upstairs.)
- T: No wonder the children were afraid of the thing. Does it make too much noise?
- J: They make more noise than the ones they have now.
- T: When did you get this one?
- J: Oh, I would say this. . . probably; . . 45 years ago. I have a picture yet, I was cutting somebody's hair with this clipper and they took the picture and that picture was taken. . . the calendar hanging on the wall and it was in 1925 you can see it is 52 years old. And that picture shows that the man was sitting there looking for that, sitting there and you can see the cord coming from the ceiling as I touched his face with these clippers that's the way the picture shows.
- T: Did you enjoy it?
- J: I still enjoy it. I wouldn't be cutting hair down in the basement if I didn't still enjoy it. Yesterday I cut my daughter's hair and I cut her husband's hair.
- T: When you started how much did you charge?
- J: We charged 5 cents for a shave and 10 cents for a hair cut.
- T: And now?
- J: The people don't get shaved anymore in the barber shop, they all have their electric shavers or the little shaver, you know, and the hair cutting now is all the way from two and a half to five dollars. But you see when years ago the working people didn't make very much money. The first year that I came to America I couldn't speak the language so I couldn't work in a barber shop the first year. So I worked in the furniture factory and they paid ten cents an hour for just ordinary work and the men working at the machines first class workmen fifteen cents an hour. So the barber couldn't charge very much for a hair cut (chuckle), as I say because the people didn't have the money.
- T: Did you work in some other things?

J: No, I only worked in the furniture factory for a year you see and by that time I had learned enough of the language, I didn't know very well, but enough, so that I got a job in a barber shop in Grand Rapids. This man his customers were mostly Holland people many who couldn't speak the Dutch language so I was just the kind of man he needed.

T: And the kind of job you wanted. And then you?

J: Like I say, I worked at it for one year in a furniture factory and then I worked for him for 2 years and then I went to Wisconsin.

T: And there it was your business?

J: No, I worked for somebody else first and later on I started a little shop for my own and some how or other we moved back to Michigan. I sold my little barber shop over there to some other barber and I went to Michigan to Holland.

T: Where did you marry?

J: Well, I was married in Wisconsin I met my wife in Grand Rapids, but during the time I was in Wisconsin we got married. We got married in Grand Rapids because her folks lived in Grand Rapids and we came here to Grand Rapids. We were married for 50 years....

T: What do you do when you need a hair cut?

J: I go to another barber!(laughs) A friend of mine,

T: It has been very interesting talking with you?

J: Well, it was nice talking with you too.

Then he showed me old pictures from his family. The picture of the electric clipper. A slip of the Holland Sentinel from two years ago. They interviewed him while he was still working in his barber shop in Washington square. He called me back to tell me that his recorder, record only half of the interview, and he would like to record mine.