

Interview with Gaye Hekman  
Interviewed by Brian Paul on 4/5/99  
History 201 - Larry Wagenaar's Michigan History Class  
Spring 1999 Semester

BP: My name is Brian Paul and I am interviewing Gaye Hekman and the date is April 5th, 1999, for Michigan History. What part of the Netherlands are you from, originally?

GH: From the province of Gronigen.

BP: Gronigen?

GH: Yeah, the Northern part.

BP: Can you describe your homeland and what it was like to live there?

GH: Well, I don't know how to begin with that really. That's kind of hard, describe your homeland. Yeah we lived in a small village, I would say. It's very close to the German border and I think it was pretty happy there growing up. We, my husband and I, lived in the same village and so we went to the same school, grade school. And, yeah I don't know what to say about my homeland, really. It rains a lot. But I was fairly happy growing up there, except I grew up during the War years. We were an occupied country, so that was not so nice. We, I don't know, Brian what to go on with this, what else did you want to know, maybe some of it will come up in the...

BP: Just how large of a town or village did you live in?

GH: Oh, I don't know, probably a couple of thousand people. It wasn't very big.

BP: Could you tell me why you emigrated?

GH: Oh, that's kind of simple, I guess. That's because my husband wanted to emigrate. And, lets see, my parents emigrated the next year, so our whole family emigrated. My parents emigrated to Brazil, and we emigrated to the United States. We had to find a sponsor and so we did that. Then we got married three weeks before we left, so we came on our

honeymoon you might say.

BP: What prompted you to leave the Netherlands?

GH: Well, I think mainly because my husband wanted to emigrate. He had been in the service, in Indonesia for two years. When he came back, he wanted to go on with his education, but I guess the country was just too small for him. He didn't see enough opportunities and he thought that he could, you know, better himself by emigrating. Even though, he was kind of wondering about what his girlfriend's parents would think about that. When he asked him my dad said to him, "Well actually we had been thinking about emigrating ourselves." So that made it a little bit easier. I grew up on a farm and I had a couple of brothers who really wanted to be farmers, but there wasn't enough land for them. So they would eventually, I think, have emigrated by themselves. But then my mom and dad decided that they might as well go with the whole family.

BP: What concerns did you have about leaving your home country?

GH: Not too many I think. Not too many, I think usually its, you hate to leave your family behind, parents and so on. But my parents were going to emigrate anyway to a different country. So, I was twenty-three at the time and I was getting married, so it was kind of exciting

BP: Oh yeah, I can imagine.

GH: Yeah

BP: Who did you travel to the United States with, well obviously with your husband? Was it just the two of you that traveled to the United States?

GH: Yes, we went to England first. We came a little bit in a different way, I guess, because

we booked passage on the Mauritania, which is a Cunard line ship. First we had the trip across the channel, which was exciting. Everybody was seasick. We were not seasick, though, that was the funny thing. We had a good time. In fact, it was funny my husband asked for breakfast and the fella who was to bring us the breakfast, he was just green. It was awful! It's kind of rough coming across a channel. But, then we left from South Hampton. It took about a week, to come to the States. We had a good trip, something new too, to travel on a big ship. It was nice. We enjoyed it.

BP: Why did you choose the United States and not another country, like your parents for instance, Brazil or Canada? What attracted you here?

GH: Well, we had tried both for the United States and Canada. I think which ever would have come through first, we would have gone to. But for my husband to go to Brazil, was not suitable, my husband is not a farmer. We have had a heating and air conditioning contracting business, so he was not interested in farming at all. We already had some family here. We had, I don't know whether you're familiar with the Hekman family from Grand Rapids? The Hekman Biscuit Company?

BP: No?

GH: Okay, they own some factories. They actually sponsored my husband's brother years ago. Some years before we came, so we thought since we already had some family here this was a good place to go. Either here or Canada. Then it turned out that our visas came through for the United States first.

BP: So it was whatever came to you first?

GH: Well yes, I think either Canada or the United States wouldn't have made too much

difference. There are I think more people from the Netherlands came to Canada than over here because it was a bit easier to get there. Here you had to have a sponsor, so somebody had to find somebody for you that could, actually I think they are responsible for you for the first year or so. If you couldn't work they had to make sure that you didn't go hungry. Anyway, our family that was already here found us a sponsor.

BP: Where did you first when you arrived in the United States?

GH: Oh, we came to Grand Rapids first of all. My husband had a sister living there already.

BP: Describe some of your impressions of Grand Rapids. How did it compare your home?

GH: It was very different. We came in January and there was a layer of snow, I couldn't believe it, like this. Back in Europe you don't have such heavy snowfalls, that looked way different. It was colder. Anyway, I think we had kind of a nice trip coming down. We came by train, through New York, mostly during the night the trip was. In the morning we arrived, I think it must have been Detroit. Anyway, the conductor on the train was a friendly fella. He wanted, you know ask some questions and we were anxious to try out our English, so he said, "Well come on we have to stop here, I'll buy you a cup of coffee." We went to the coffeshop, I remember that my husband and I both were kind of anxious to get back on that train because we knew we had to go to Grand Rapids. And he says, "Don't worry he says that train won't go anywhere before I blow the whistle and I'm buying you a cup of coffee, so take your time." So we thought this was a pretty good country, especially since the cup of coffee was only fifteen cents!

BP: You couldn't beat that, huh?

GH: No.

BP: Can you tell me why you ended up settling in Holland, Michigan? What drew you from Grand Rapids to Holland?

GH: Probably, mostly because there seemed to be a better work opportunity here. We had by that time, we lived in Grand Rapids for about a year, I think. After a year, my husband's parents had also emigrated and they lived here in Holland, and a brother lived in Holland. So Holland seemed like a good place to go.

BP: What were your first impressions of Holland as a town?

GH: Actually, we lived for year in Grand Rapids, so I guess my impressions are more from Grand Rapids than from Holland. I did go out and try to do some work, being just married you needed a lot of stuff, and my husband found a job not too quickly. I did some cleaning of houses for different ladies and it was a good way to get acquainted with I think the lifestyle, the different foods, you know, the cooking, you got to be in the kitchen a little bit. I think I learned a lot in the first year, it was good.

BP: First year of being married and first year living in a new country.

GH: Yeah, right.

BP: Could you describe some of the problems you might have faced adjusting to life in Holland or the United States?

GH: Really not too many problems, that I can think of. Even though, you know the language when you come, it's still, you know the different expressions that you have to get used to. Also, a little bit different style of living, maybe. Holland, the Netherlands is a small country. Well, here you don't get acquainted with your neighbors so quickly. And that was, in a way you miss that at first. You have to make new contacts, so that's, yeah that's

a little bit difficult. But, you overcome that pretty quick, I think.

BP: How much English did you speak, at first?

GH: Well I think quite a bit, because in high school we had three years of English. Everybody is supposed to have, let's see, four years of French, three years of German, and three years of English, in high school.

BP: Really?

GH: Oh yes, and so that gives you a knowledge of the grammar and so on, so you can write it too and read it. Then I took a little extra course before I left, because it was a few years since I had been in high school. But it was helpful, it really was.

BP: Did you know many people, you mentioned earlier that you had family in Grand Rapids?

GH: Yeah but we didn't know too many people. I think you get acquainted in your church. For instance, we joined a church in Grand Rapids and then in Holland. That's probably where we made most of our first acquaintances and friends.

BP: You mentioned you looked for work when you first came here, where were you first employed?

GH: In Grand Rapids and later on in Holland, too. But, Oh my goodness do you need names? What I did was put an ad in the paper, that I would like some cleaning jobs. My sister told me, she said you have to put in that you're Dutch, because they know the Dutch ladies are clean. So it wasn't very hard to find a job, a day here and a day there. Pretty soon I think I worked four days a week or so. It was pretty hard work. When I think of it, you made a dollar an hour and you had to work hard for that. I still think that some of the American ladies took advantage of the immigrants that way. But anyway, it was

good, it was alright.

BP: How did the move affect you and your family?

GH: Well, of course their were just the two of us. When you are just married there isn't, it took a long time for us to go back, I mean to the Netherlands. I remember it took twenty-five years, I think. Because my parents moved to Brazil and so we visited Brazil several times. But going back to the Netherlands, I remember, my husband said when we landed the first time he said, now the honeymoon is over.

BP: What traditions did you bring with you that are still a part of your family, that's a tough question?

GH: Yeah, maybe things around the holidays that you do. For one thing we always had two holidays, two days for Christmas, two days for Easter. I just talked to my sister and she says, you don't have your holiday today do you? No, in Europe there is a first day for Easter and then a second day and that's a holiday too for the countries. I think we still do some different things, like making, especially when it comes to food, baking. In fact I have an electric iron that I bought there and I still make certain cookies around Christmas time. I don't think there's to much difference when it comes to a customs.

BP: What were some of the most difficult adjustments for you to make?

GH: Well, I don't know? I don't remember them as being so difficult, really. I think it was because we had for some time planned to emigrate and you sort of worked to it. That you know you're gonna be in a different country and you try to find out whatever you can about it. Especially, when some of your family lives there already. They tell you, well this maybe a bit different, and that's different. No, nothing really that bothered me a great

deal, I think. I think sometimes you do get a little homesick, at first for familiar faces and familiar places. But after you have a family of your own, we had four children. You really, pretty soon all taken up in, kids go to school. We tried for instance, with our oldest child to teach her some of the Dutch language and she was pretty good at it, until she was about three years old. She started playing outdoors with the neighbor kids. I remember one lady telling me, "Now you shouldn't do that, you shouldn't teach your child a different language. She'll have trouble." I thought well I don't know, I don't think so. Actually, sometimes I regret that I didn't teach them more. Your first one is kind of easy to teach some, but then number two comes along and they go outside and they talk English. It's very hard to keep the language. It's one thing that maybe, that I kind of regret a little bit, that I didn't teach them more. You're afraid I think that your children will maybe not adjust well enough then, even though, they were born here. But I know some of my nieces that came here when they were five or six and started going to school first in the Netherlands, they had a little problem with the language.

BP: What did you find easier than what you thought before you came over? What you thought might be difficult, but came and thought, this isn't that bad after all?

GH: I wouldn't honestly know, Brian. I think we had a pretty good attitude to emigrate because we really wanted to make our way here. Be in a different country and I think we appreciate Holland, it's a good place to bring up a family. The values here were a lot the same. So I guess I'm not the type to look back a whole lot, you know and be too homesick for what I left behind. Even though I still do appreciate it, I do appreciate my upbringing and my schooling and so on. It was good.

BP: Why have you stayed in Holland?

GH: I think we had some thoughts about moving some different places at times, especially when it wasn't too easy to find a job in 1953 I think. It was a little bit tough, it took my husband, I think six weeks before he could find a little job. In the first year, I think he had seven or eight different places. Because they didn't need you anymore and you were the last hired you were the first to go. He had been interested and he had gone to school and to college to be a civil engineer. But he didn't quite finish before we left. He tried in Grand Rapids to get into that but pretty quickly found out that if he didn't have his schooling here, his degrees from back there wouldn't help him any. He decided he had to do something different and he finally decided on mechanical engineering. And worked for different companies, mostly in heating. One company where he worked was trying to sell their business and they offered it to him. So he got into it for himself and built it up. I worked in the office, so we had sort of a family run business for a while, before we hired more people. It was good, it was hard work but it was good.

BP: In what ways have you been involved in the Holland community?

GH: Well, maybe not a whole lot. My husband is a Kiwanian, has been for many years. I worked with him in that some. We have been doing volunteer work more lately, since we have retired. Not so much in Holland, itself I think, through are church mostly we do volunteer work. Come to think of the things that I did, I think for the school you worked. Our kids went to Christian school, there's activities going on there that they can use people for but not a whole lot. Tomorrow I'm going to work for the Red Cross, that's one of the first times I've ever done that. I can't really think of anything, especially that I've

done.

BP: You mentioned your church, what church affiliation is that?

GH: The Christian Reformed Church, right now we are members of Harderwyk Church here on the north side.

BP: What influenced your decision on which church to attend?

GH: I think mainly because it came closest to the church we left. The Gereformeerde kerk in the Netherlands and we found that the Christian Reformed Church came very close to what we were taught, and used to believe in. We have been members of that church for all these years.

BP: Really?

GH: Not the local church, but first in Grand Rapids and then when we lived in town we went to Prospect Park Church. Then we moved to the north side so we would go with the church that is closer to you, but still the same denomination.

BP: Changing gears a little bit, increasingly Holland is becoming more culturally diverse. When you see newer immigrants settling in Holland, how do you feel?

GH: Holland used to have mostly Dutch people immigrants come, I think. Now of course we have a lot of others, Spanish speaking people. I think they're welcome, as long as they add to our city, I think. Being immigrants ourselves you wouldn't begrudge anybody trying to find maybe a better life.

BP: What are your feelings about the Hispanic community?

GH: Well, it's something that the Dutch are not, maybe, too happy about, I think. Quite often the areas where they settle are not kept up like the Dutch are used to. I think, maybe,

that's one of the things that bothers me a little bit. You like to see your city do well, but I know we have many people of Spanish descent here that do very well. I wish them well.

I think to see Holland grow as it has, I'm not quite so happy about that. I think we are getting too big, I kind of like the smaller town, that I know. There is not a whole lot you can do about that. Holland has attracted more industry and more people. Also, a lot of people, I think, like the area for the living conditions, what can you say when you're an immigrant?

BP: What are your feelings about the Asian community?

GH: I kind of am sad to see the friction that there seems to be, between, especially the younger people, of the Asian community and the Latin American community. We have had some problems, some gangs that don't get along. I don't like to see that. We have some people in our church from Laos, good people, but there seems to also be an element that is really, I don't know. I don't know, they seem to like to fight.

BP: Do you see the Hispanics and the Asians, do you see them facing similar or opportunities that you faced when you immigrated here in the 1950's.

GH: Well in some ways it's a bit easier for them, I think. Not so much for us personally but if you do come here with a family of children, they have to go to school here and speak the English language, it may be hard for them at first. Yet, I think for children it's okay. I am not a great fan of the bilingual teaching that they do. My feeling is if you want to emigrate you have to learn the language. If that's a bit difficult at first you just have to do your best. I can't see where all the bilingual stuff is so necessary, honestly. I think if you do not learn the language before you go to a country that's wrong. I think you should put

yourself out to do that, I'm afraid that a lot of these people don't. They just come, I hear little kids in the store speak Spanish, I try to understand them because we took some Spanish courses. But, it's hard to do, and I think well, when you are out in a store why don't you just speak English. Because, but then I guess the parents don't know it well enough, so they keep speaking Spanish with their kids. I don't know how important it is? You want to keep your culture, and maybe that is harder for Spanish speaking people because their culture is different from European. I think the European and the American culture is enough alike that you can adjust easier. I think what they are trying to do is hang on to their culture.

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

GH: Oh my, I tell you the first years that we were here we were asked to participate in some of these things for Tulip Time and Dutch heritage. I think there's a lot of good in it, how was the question asked? How do you...

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

GH: I think it's good, really in general. It brings tourists. I think there's a lot of good in the Dutch heritage. I guess I'm in favor of it.

BP: Do you think Holland is a good representation of the Netherlands or is it commercialized, a little bit?

GH: Well I tell you, before I came here I hadn't seen very many Dutch costumes, at all. I think they go back kind of to like the Netherlands was years ago. When we first came here we talked to some immigrants that were maybe second generation or so that still knew some Dutch. It sounded awfully old fashioned to us. Even we don't keep up with language

quite like it's spoken in the Netherlands now. We hear from our family back there expressions that are strange to us. I think language and so on evolved even more and you miss some of that. I think in general that the Dutch heritage is good. I think we do attract people here in West Michigan to live and work here because of the work ethic that we have and so on. I think that's good.

BP: Could you describe your feelings toward Tulip Time, which is coming up pretty quick here?

GH: Oh I don't know. For years we hardly ever go to any of the parades, I think if it's year after year that you live here. At first it's kind of neat, it's different. It is very commercialized. We used to tell our kids that Saturday of Tulip Time Parade is such a terrible crowd. So we always liked to get out of town, my husband always used to say to the kids, what would you rather do have a picnic in the Allegan woods or go to silly old parade? Of course the children marched in the parades and so we worked with that and had costumes for them, it was kind of neat. But it is not like it is in the Netherlands at all. They don't make such a big deal out of that. They tried to bring in some Dutch traditions, but especially the Klompen dancing and so on. It's good for business I think, and it's good for tourism. I love the tulips, that part of it I really like. I sure hope they keep that up. It makes our city beautiful, it's nice.

BP: What are your feelings about the Cinco de Mayo festival?

GH: Oh yeah, well I think as long as we have our Dutch festival, it's alright to have the Cinco de Mayo too. Even though, I think our heritage is still mainly Dutch and I think they really push the Spanish part of it quite a bit.

BP: Do you feel the community celebrates your heritage well?

GH: Celebrates the heritage? How do they do that? I don't know?

BP: I guess maybe what the question is saying, is it being done in a positive manner?

GH: Well maybe the way they portray certain customs from the Netherlands and life in the Netherlands. I guess things have changed in the Netherlands and not always for the better. I think the years that we lived there were, of course they were war years to, so it was a more serious time. I think even for us as teenagers, you know my dad worked in the underground some and I was about fifteen, so I helped a little bit in that. Our growing up years were different, I think. But when it comes to the customs and the heritage here, I think it is pretty positive what they do. They have the Dutch Heritage show and I think they portray pretty well what the values are or were. They are not as good as they were, but yeah I think so.

BP: Have you experienced any discrimination in Holland?

GH: A little bit. Well over the years not that much, but when you first come as an immigrant there are, maybe especially when it comes to work and jobs. And especially when you set up a business of your own, there's a little bit of, yeah what should I call it? In a way people like for immigrants to come to do well, but I think there's also maybe some kind of jealousy? A little bit? You know after all you came here from a different country, I think we have experienced just a little bit of that. But we haven't let it bother us a whole lot. By and large, I think we have been taken in pretty well.

BP: What paths have your children taken?

GH: Well, I think they have done well. Two of our sons are engineers and have university

degrees, master degrees and good jobs. Our daughter is also an engineer, she teaches engineering at Grand Valley. She has taught at the naval academy for several years. One of our daughters is an attorney. They've done alright.

BP: Definitely!

GH: They were all educated here at Holland Christian. Our daughter who teaches at Grand Valley just was chosen Michigan Professor of the Year.

BP: Really, well congratulations.

GH: Yeah, that was nice. She's a teacher who has a heart for her students, so that's good. We like to see that.

BP: Do they, you mentioned this earlier, do they speak any Dutch?

GH: No they don't. I kind of regret that, but our oldest daughter can understand quite a bit, I think. But some years back we took all our kids back to the Netherlands, kids and in-laws to see where mom and dad grew up and see a little bit of the country. That was nice, I think they liked that.

BP: Are they interested in your Dutch heritage?

GH: I think so. Even though, they have made some trips but then it is usually to Europe and they include the Netherlands too. We still have some family there, they come over here and we go there. There's still quite a bit of contact, which is nice.

BP: Alright last question, what would you say to a friend who was considering moving to the United States?

GH: Well, it makes a difference why they would want to come. It's not easy to move to the United States. I know that because we have a nephew who has had a student visa. He

would've been an asset to the United States and yet they wouldn't let him come. He's an engineer, but you know the United States limits the amount of people that they let come. I would say if you can, it's a good place to come to. Yes.

BP: Well thank you for a taking time to speak with me, for fifty minutes I learned quite a bit. This is more interesting than my lectures at Hope, that's for sure.

GH: Well good.

BP: Thank you so much.