

Oral History Interview with  
Jan Vanden Bosch

(unedited)

Conducted April 21, 1997  
by Phyllis Booi

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interview with Jan Vanden Bosch  
April 21, 1997  
Interviewer: Phyllis Booi

PB: What is your name?

JV: My name is Janet Vanden Bosch.

PB: Where were you born?

JV: In Vatena, Friesland, in the Netherlands.

PB: In what year?

JV: Nineteen thirty-nine.

PB: When did you leave the Netherlands?

JV: In April of 1950.

PB: Where did you go to in the United States?

JV: We arrived in Grand Rapids, and I lived there for three years, and then we moved to Zeeland, Michigan.

PB: How long were you there in Zeeland?

JV: Until I graduated from high school and went to college. About five years, I lived there for five years.

PB: Where did you meet your husband?

JV: In high school.

PB: At Zeeland High School?

JV: No, at Holland Christian.

PB: How many children do you have?

JV: I have four sons.

PB: Where do they live?

JV: One lives in South Haven, he is the oldest one. He is 35. The next one lives in Sparta. He is 33. And, the next one lives in Grand Rapids. He is 28. The youngest one lives in Korea right now. He is teaching English over there, and he is 26.

PB: Is that at a Christian college?

JV: No, he is working for an institute that hires college graduates. This is just for adventure.

PB: Did they graduate from Calvin or Hope?

JV: Three of them graduated from Calvin. The oldest graduated from U of M, and then he went to live in the Netherlands for awhile. He met his wife there, and then he lived in Germany. Then, he went to school in the Netherlands and graduated with a city planning degree. Now he is the City Manager of South Haven, Michigan.

PB: Your husband, he has lived here all of his life?

JV: He lived in Borculo, but he was born in Zeeland Hospital. He went to the army and we both lived in Germany while he was stationed there. Then we moved back to Grand Rapids and he finished up at Calvin College. He taught school for thirty years and he retired last summer.

PB: You were born and raised in the Netherlands. Can you remember much of your life in the Netherlands as compared to your life when you came here?

JV: Two weeks ago I was in the same town I was born in, and I met three of my girlfriends there. That was so neat. One of them I had not seen for forty-seven

years.

PB: Did you recognize one another?

JV: No, we would not have recognized each other.

PB: Somebody had planned this?

JV: Yes. It was great. When I walked around that little town, I remembered a few things...a few things about the war. I was only six when it ended, but somehow I remember a few things.

PB: How was life then there? Was it very harsh, or were you too young?

JV: I was too young to know that. I don't think I would remember that.

PB: You probably don't remember your life when you first moved to the Grand Rapids area. Was it so different?

JV: No. The only thing I did not know was the language. It took me about a year before I felt comfortable in school with the language. I have two brothers and we were about a year and a year and a half apart. The three of us kind of grew up together then.

PB: Your language, you had trouble with it. I mean fluency in it. Did anyone ever make fun of you?

JV: Yes. When I went to school in Grand Rapids, there were always kids who would always walk behind you and say "Dutchman, Dutchman, belly full of straw. Can't say nothing but ya, ya, ya" (laughing). But when I moved to Zeeland, nobody paid any attention to that. By that time it was three years later and I could speak English then.

PB: You were probably in a "safer" environment because most of them were of Dutch ancestry.

JV: No. Not in Zeeland. There were only two of us kids in my class that were from the Netherlands. In Grand Rapids, I think there were at least ten. But, it was just for fun.

PB: They weren't being nasty then?

JV: No. I just still remember that. I thought it was funny (laughing). It didn't bother me. In Zeeland there were a lot fewer immigrants, recent immigrants. In Grand Rapids there were a lot. A lot of them came in 1950.

PB: What church did you go to then? Was it a Reformed or....

JV: Christian Reformed. When we moved to Grand Rapids, we moved in with a family who had just come to Grand Rapids three months before. They were from the same town we were from in the Netherlands. They went to Grandville Avenue Christian Reformed Church. Those ladies from Grandville Avenue Christian Reformed Church gave my mom a shower, so she was all equipped with a kitchen and stuff. That was very nice, they were very nice.

PB: Did they speak Dutch, the older ladies in church?

JV: Yes. In Grandville Avenue they had Dutch services too.

PB: So your mother felt at home, and you probably did too.

JV: Three months later, another family moved in with us from the same town. I think that was about it, the three families. We all helped each other out in the beginning, so that was nice.

PB: You didn't get any aid from the government then?

JV: No. We did have to have a sponsor. Those people kind of helped us out, too. My dad found a job right away at Hekman Baking Company. He was a baker. Then later on, he worked at Keeler Brass. I guess he could earn more money there. Three years later, he opened Zeeland Bakery in Zeeland. He did that until he died.

PB: You moved to Zeeland and then you probably were in Holland and this whole area. You were old enough then to see what it was like in those days. Comparing what it was like when you were twelve years old to now, have you seen a big change?

JV: When we lived in Zeeland, we didn't get to Holland that often.

PB: In Zeeland then.

JV: Zeeland has changed a lot. Zeeland always used to be open, all the stores used to open on Saturday night and that was a big outing for the farmers. It was busy. We had a store then too, and I could see all of that on Saturday nights.

PB: What did you sell then?

JV: Baked goods, it was a bakery. After a year, I went to Holland Christian. Then I did get to Holland quite often.

PB: Have you seen a change then.... You said the stores were open Saturday night because on Sunday they weren't open.

JV: This was in Zeeland, I am not sure about Holland.

PB: They weren't open in 1950 when I graduated Hope College.

JV: I think that was typical of Zeeland because of the farmers. They could all come downtown on Saturday nights and do their shopping.

PB: I don't remember if they were open when I was here, I know that they were closed on Sunday. I think in every place stores was closed on Sunday.

JV: They still are, mostly.

PB: In town here, they are closed. Out in the mall they would be open. Do these changes bother you?

JV: No.

PB: What was your first impression comparing Zeeland to Holland when you first came to the Christian High?

JV: I don't remember that too much. It was just bigger, and we rode on the school bus. I didn't think about it too much I guess.

PB: Was there any particular quality of life that you liked in Zeeland and Holland?

JV: Compared to Grand Rapids?

PB: Yes.

JV: I thought Zeeland was very nice and quiet. I liked it.

PB: Were the people a little bit nicer?

JV: I don't know about that, they were nice in Grand Rapids too. It was just more relaxed. You could walk everywhere.

PB: You didn't have to be afraid.

JV: No, we never thought about that in those days.

PB: How long have you lived in Holland?

JV: Since 1968, then we came back to Holland.

PB: Did you like Holland?

JV: I like it very much.

PB: Do you still like it?

JV: Oh, yes.

PB: We've seen more changes, because we haven't lived here for three years, compared to living here when we were in college. How do you view the change and the less-Dutch here now?

JV: That doesn't bother me. Just so it doesn't bother everybody else either. This way you don't make a big thing out of it. I think that is alright. It is just getting busier here, you just avoid going out at 3:30 in the afternoon.

PB: Especially on 32nd Street.

JV: And on River (laughing).

PB: The influence of another nationality hasn't bothered you in any way at all?

JV: No. The only thing I wish they would do more is learn more English. I always think that I had to do it, so they can do it too. If you want to live in this country, then you should learn the language. But, it is not easy.

PB: No. I don't think so.

JV: Not for a grown-up. I went to school and I picked it up real fast. My parents picked it up real fast because three years later they opened the store so they had to speak the language. They did have seminary students from Calvin College teach them English too. A lot of these Dutch people had these seminary students come in. They would earn extra money that way. These people would go as a group to someone's home

and these seminary students would teach them. That was interesting.

PB: That was nice. They could probably help them read the Bible too. Maybe that is how they learned a lot, from reading.

JV: They did have church, so there was a lot of Dutch then too.

PB: Your family wanted to learn English?

JV: We always spoke English at home after a few years. We very seldom spoke Dutch. I don't know if that is good or bad.

PB: How was your Dutch on your trip to the Netherlands?

JV: We could get along with our hands. (laughing) They thought I was doing all right, but it didn't sound very good to me.

PB: Well, you're not used to it.

JV: No.

PB: Are you involved in the church here in Holland?

JV: We go to a church south of Fennville, to Bravo. It's a mission church from the Christian Reformed Church. We just help out over there. We just decided to do that. We used to go to Providence, and then they split up. We decided we can do mission work around here too, rather than going somewhere else.

PB: Then you are very involved in the church?

JV: Yes, but it is a little farther away so it is not as much as we would like to.

PB: How far is that?

JV: Twenty-seven miles.

PB: One-way.

JV: Yes. It takes us about 25 minutes to get there. Right now, my husband is just coming home. He went to the Gleaners in Grand Rapids to pick up food for an outreach at our church over there. So he does that once in awhile.

PB: In the time you have lived here, has there ever been a controversy that you know of in Holland?

JV: I can't remember.

PB: Well, that is good.

JV: There probably was, but I wasn't involved.

PB: How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays in the community today?

JV: In Holland? I don't think it plays as much any more. Maybe with Tulip Time, but it seems that everybody gets involved in it, so it is not just the Dutch. Although this year it seems to be more because it is an anniversary year of 150 years. The reason we went to the Netherlands two weeks ago was because they would like to build a village on Windmill Island. My brother-in-law and sister-in-law would like to build a house there, so we went there to look at houses. So, that way, Holland is getting a little bit more involved with the Dutch heritage than it used to be.

PB: The work ethic that the Dutch always had, I think it is still here, do you think so?

JV: Yes. But I think the Vietnamese...

PB: Oh, they work!

JV: ...and the Spanish. I get involved with a lot of Spanish people through work and they seem to be that way too.

PB: Where do you work?

JV: I used to own the Cake Gallery. I sold it to my daughter-in-law, so now I work for her.

PB: Where is the Cake Gallery?

JV: On the corner of 32nd and Washington. Just two blocks away.

PB: Is that on the east side of Washington?

JV: Right.

PB: Then I think I have seen that. Do you make those beautiful wedding cakes?

JV: Yes. That is what I do over there.

PB: You decorate them?

JV: Yes.

PB: They look so pretty in the window.

JV: Oh, thanks.

PB: I didn't know you could just go in and buy something there.

JV: We usually have cakes on hand, but you're better off ordering and then you get what you want.

PB: Do you think there are any problems facing the general citizens of Holland? Do you feel safe walking in Holland?

JV: During the day I do. I walk early in the morning and I would never do that by myself I don't think. I would prefer walking with somebody else. But I have never encountered anything that would make me feel this way, but just for common sense you shouldn't be walking at night by yourself. Just in case....

PB: You haven't experienced any sort of crime, and no one has ever tried to break into

your house?

JV: No, not that I know of.

PB: When you were young, what was a typical day for you when you moved to Zeeland?

JV: I would get up and go to school. Then, I would come home and help out at the bakery after school, probably cleaning up. When I was a freshman in high school, I started working in the store on Saturdays and after school. I did things with my girlfriends. I went to the beach once in awhile. I did things in church with the young people.

PB: Have you ever noticed a generation gap between the ages in Holland? Did you know some older people that you would stop and talk with, or didn't you do that? Was there too much of a gap between ages?

JV: No, that didn't bother me. When I went to Providence Church, we always had a school circle and the older ladies would always help us earn money for school. They were so neat. So I got to know those older ladies. I think that is the way you have to get to know older people, just to get involved with each other. Then it doesn't seem like there is an age difference. We were young people's leaders too, so we got to know the younger kids too. At least to me it isn't, but maybe when they talk to me it might be.

PB: Now I am going to go back to the Netherlands. World War II, do you remember anything of that?

JV: Yes, I do. Toward the end of the war, the Germans came into our town. I remember them coming over the bridge and the truck stopped, and the Germans

would come out of the back of that truck and they went all over town. We lived in a real tiny little town.

PB: What was the name of it?

JV: Vatena. There were several men outside looking around and they were all arrested, including my dad and my minister. Two days later my dad came back, but the minister they sent to a concentration camp. My dad also owned a bakery there and he had a boy helping him. He was shot by a German. He and his friend were fishing in a boat. They saw this German on the side of the canal, so they went into the reeds and sat there for a couple of hours. The German saw them and he watched that spot. After awhile, the boy that worked for my dad stuck his head up to see if the German had left. The German had been aiming his gun that way the whole time, and he shot him right in the head. That was a big thing in that little town. I remember that. Then, I remember when the war ended and we were liberated. I always thought they were American soldiers coming through our town, and a few years ago I went back to the Netherlands and we went into a museum. Then I found out that they were Canadians that came through.

PB: You couldn't tell the difference in the speech pattern?

JV: Right. They spoke English, so I just assumed they were Americans. But I remember that too. I was six when the war ended. We weren't too bad off in the war. Just at the end a little bit.

PB: Did you have enough food to eat?

JV: We did have to go to a building to pick up food. We would go with a cooking pot

and they would put potatoes and vegetables and some meat in there and we could take that home. But we were never hungry, at least I don't remember that we were. I never was.

PB: Did you have enough firewood or coal to keep you warm?

JV: I think so.

PB: You don't remember?

JV: I don't remember being deprived of that. I do remember we had to cover our windows up with black paper every night so no light would go out. We weren't allowed to have radios, so my father buried our radio. At the end of the war, he dug it up and it was all corroded. I remember a bridge near our town that was blown up. That is about it.

PB: That is quite a bit.

JV: Yes, I guess so, but compared to Rotterdam we had it very easy.

PB: Yes. Rotterdam was terrible.

JV: They were hungry. They were starving out there.

PB: I know. Someone had told me a story about that, but I won't get into it. You have enjoyed working in the bakery here?

JV: Yes.

PB: Now, you don't have all of that responsibility, your daughter-in-law does.

JV: Yes (laughing). I started that in 1989. I had it for eight years.

PB: Your decorating, where did you learn that? Gradually or all at once?

JV: My father taught me in Zeeland Bakery. I did it there too. My brother bought that

bakery and I did it for him too. Then he sold it. I figured I could open my own cake shop. I just wanted to do cakes, nothing else. He still owns a bakery in Holland, it's called Dutch Delight Pastry. He doesn't go into cakes that much, no wedding cakes. So we are not in competition.

PB: How do you think the role of women has changed in Holland? Have you noticed?

JV: Yes. Everybody my age works. It used to be that you would get together for coffee, but you don't anymore. You get together for breakfast on Saturday mornings. That is about the only time you can find time.

PB: Your mother would not have worked?

JV: My mother did because we owned our own business, but otherwise she probably wouldn't have.

PB: There weren't too many other mothers, you girlfriend's mothers, that worked?

JV: No. And my mother wasn't out of the home because we lived above the bakery. So she was always there, so we never knew that my mother worked (laughing). So, it was a little different.

PB: Can you tell me what you have heard others say of Holland, Michigan.

JV: Sometimes they say it is hard to get to know people in Holland, but I never found that. That is what I heard a few times, but I thought well.... But, I think you have to belong to a church or something, some organization, to get to know people. You can get to know the neighbors.

PB: What other organization do you belong to other than the church?

JV: Nothing.

PB: Nothing, you are too busy with the church.

JV: No, I'm too busy working (laughing).

PB: Well, I am trying to think of something else that I might be able to ask you. Did you have any major turning point in your life, since you have been in this country?

JV: Other than starting my own business, that was quite a turning point.

PB: You are glad you did it though?

JV: Yes, I am glad. It was busy after awhile. It started slow, but it got busier and busier. I will always be glad that I did that because if I hadn't, I would always think back, oh, I wish I had. I always wanted to have a cake business where people could just come in and sit and relax and order their wedding cakes.

PB: You did this when your children were growing up then?

JV: Right, my youngest was in high school.

PB: So, he didn't need twenty-four hour a day care.

JV: No. I did work part-time when my youngest one was four. I started working just one day a week doing wedding cakes in Zeeland.

PB: Can you think of anything you would like to tell for posterity, for the people all of these years down the line that will listen to this tape?

JV: About Holland?

PB: Or your life here.

JV: I always enjoyed living in Holland, so far. One thing I always enjoyed was listening to "Talk of the Town" on the radio. When I first came to Holland, I didn't know that much, even though I lived in Zeeland I didn't know that much about Holland. I had

a baby right after we moved here and I had two children in school, so I was home most of the time. I learned a lot about Holland just listening to "Talk of the Town" (laughing).

PB: Do you think there are any drawback living here?

JV: If you go to a city like Pittsburgh or New York, you always have so many tourist attractions that are well-known. When you have people come here to Holland, there isn't that much to do, to show them (laughing). At least I always think about that. But, then we would go to Saugatuck or Grand Haven and then they always enjoy it here. To me it is not like a metropolitan area, but I enjoy it.

PB: Have you ever taken anyone to Hope College to give them a tour of the college?

JV: No. Maybe I should.

PB: You should because it is quite a well known college.

JV: I usually take them to Calvin.

PB: That is terrible (laughing). I'm a Hope graduate, so that is why I say that.

JV: Although, I was a tour guide once at Tulip Time. I had this tour bus load of people from Montana. We happened to be walking through Hope College and these people wanted to know what the name of every tree was in Hope College because in Montana there are not very many trees. Luckily, one of my boys had just had to have a leaf collection, so I knew quite a few trees in there. I thought that was very interesting.

PB: That would be, yes.

JV: They saw these tall trees and "oh, what kind of tree is that, what kind of tree is that?"

(laughing). So, I always think of Hope College when I think of that.

PB: The trees. That is a good point. Well, I guess that is about it. Nothing else you can think of?

JV: No, maybe tomorrow I will, but....

PB: I forgot to ask what your maiden name was.

JV: My maiden name was Van Asperen. I don't have any relatives here, they are all back in the Netherlands.

PB: Thank you.