

Oral History Interview with
Theresa Weerstra

Conducted June 30, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interviewer: Ann Paeth

AP: The first thing, could you state your name and where you were born and when?

TW: I was born in the Netherlands in August, 1907 in Friesland, I am a Fresian.

AP: When did you come to Holland, Michigan? And why did you come?

TW: I came to Holland, Michigan in 1949. We were here before living in Chicago. My first daughter was born there, but then the recession came, and we went back. But my husband, he never lost sight of America. Then, of course, World War II came. The Lord has always something in store for us, but we never know why or how, but we must have had to be there, I guess. Then we came back, as I said, in 1949.

AP: Why did you come here?

TW: To Holland, Michigan? That was through Dr. Bonzelaar, who is here yet. His parents visited us in the Netherlands. We first planned to go back to Chicago, where we came from the first time. I said, why don't we go to Holland, Michigan? Then we came to Holland, Michigan that way, not knowing anybody here. Except, during the recession time that we were there, we got packages. My husband was an elder in the church. I got a coat out of a package that was sent to us in Friesland. I reached in that coat, and there was the name of Timmerman. We came here and we ended up in Graafschap. We had wonderful neighbors there. Originally, we belonged to the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. What made a difference if we went to Graafschap Church? That sermon in the afternoon, that was something that we like.

We went anyway to the English service, because we were here before, for the children.

AP: So they learned in English?

TW: Yes. Little did we know that the children caught on so quick, they just went around with people who could not talk Dutch, but English, and they know all about English already. Then we went to the Dutch service, too. One thing you have to laugh about, my youngest one at that time, and daddy was still reading the Dutch Bible, he said, "Now I know what you were talking about, dad." Always (in English). He said, "Autos, you were talking about autos." Funny things happen in your life. We laugh now about it, but then he quit all together, and he read the English Bible. That is how we came to this town.

AP: What did you think of it when you first came? How was it different from the other places you lived?

TW: The people were wonderful. We were somebody. They made us feel welcome. A real big welcome. We had good neighbors. We had to learn about old traditions. Here, Holland is a town for me full of warm-hearted people, welcoming. They don't look down on you.

AP: So they were very welcoming. How did you learn English? Did you learn it when you came to Chicago?

TW: You quick learn. I went to school before we came to learn English in the Netherlands. My husband was here before, and he knew English, too. It was hard to leave the old country. My father and mother, my brothers and my sisters. When you

marry, you promise to follow your husband. They don't do that now so much. I don't agree with what they have now. I'm still old fashioned. I had promised to follow my husband. But it was hard to leave them. Anyway, things don't go just the way we think they would be. The harvest came in and there was no work and there was a recession. It was not easy to go.

AP: Did any of your family end up coming over to America?

TW: Oh yes. My sister and her husband and the children. They came because we were here.

AP: Did they settle in Holland?

TW: Yes. Then they moved to Illinois. My other sister came, Grace Duister and husband.

AP: Were the cities different here? What kind of work did your husband do?

TW: My husband was, in the Netherlands, a tool and dye maker. He worked for Bosch Machine Works. Not when we came at first. We were here in the Holland _____. He worked until he died.

AP: Has Holland changed since you've come here? How?

TW: Oh, terrific. 8th Street... Much has changed. Even this place where I live, when I came here, it was all mud. The same thing has happened all over in Holland. The Civic Center. That wasn't there when we came. Quite different. There was no activity going on. Evergreen Commons is there, the Freedom Village is there. That's all changed. We came in for the family market on Wednesdays and Saturdays, that's all improved. It really was nice. And the city... Here was nothing. All

woods. Now here you've got a mall. There are malls, and a little mall close by me here, a K-mart. All of that was not here. The Baker Book Store was on the main street in Holland. It grew out that way, too. You have now the college there, Davenport. Haworth wasn't there. Haworth was right on 8th Street, that's where Haworth started. Look at it now. Prince Incorporated. There were no car washes. All that. A lot of things have happened in the time that we were here. That is for the good. Now we come to the other part. Now we come to the part that Holland improve more. When we came, we did not have to lock the doors. We trusted each other. Now, you have to have the door locked. Though not here.

AP: Here the door in the front is locked.

TW: But crime in Holland was not there. And now a lot of crime goes on here. They kidnap the children and rob the stores and burn the churches. Drugs, we've got that. Now you know from both sides.

AP: Do you like the size of the city now, or is it too big?

TW: No, that doesn't bother me. Because I cannot go very far. But we get Dial-a-Ride here. We have that for transportation.

AP: Are there any kind of organizations or clubs that you were involved in?

TW: The Red Cross. Within my church, of course, there were different organizations that I belonged to. In the Red Cross I went to Battle Creek and to different hospitals collecting bloods. We went to Grand Rapids to the hospital, check the patients there and show things to them. That was the Red Cross, they needed us, so we were there. In the church, every church has it's organizations. Ladies' Aid and teaching Sunday

School crafts and all that stuff.

AP: Has the church changed a lot since you've been here?

TW: Yes. They still argue about that, in all denominations. I went with the Reformed Church because between Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church, I cannot see why they don't go together. We belong to the Father, to the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three. It is our foundation. What is it to argue about. We have the Lord and the Bible. That woman business, women elders and deacons and even ministers, we have them in the Christian Reformed Church, too.

AP: What do you think about that?

TW: No. I am against that. Definitely I am against it. A woman has her place, to take care of the family. They can be a deaconess. One of my daughters is a deaconess. But she has no say. She visits the sick. She brings news around. Whenever there's sorrow in a family, she is going to be there. On Ash Wednesday, she can be of help. That's good, no say. But I think a woman has a good place to take care of the family, be a mother. Her children may not want her here or there. I had twelve. Five are gone. The Lord took them. I said, OK. But when you grow older just like me, you see the foundation is pretty good yet. I would say that from the ones who are left, the seven, everyone came to know that they belong. But when the grandchildren and the great grandchildren... Different story, living together. My heart breaks for some of them. Some of them say, "Oh, God, what is God anyway?" Blessed are they that are meek. That is God's own law, that will help us get through this earthly domain. How does God feel about this: living together, getting pregnant,

having a child? You think that I don't shed many tears about that? I do. Also, I kept all the promises. My grandchildren were baptized. How do we get baptized? You were baptized, weren't you? What did they say? I baptize you--

AP: ...in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

TW: OK. You got it! Do you think ever that the Holy Spirit will leave you in here [motions to her heart]? Never. That is my anger for them. For them I say, Dearest God, do you keep your promises? Maybe they will wait to death, and they'll say, oh, there is God. For me, I cannot go till death. For me, there is God. I might be wrong in my philosophy of life. But I don't think so.

AP: What else has changed about the role of women?

TW: I don't know. Some of the women who I heard preach were OK. I am against it. The ones who I have heard, I would not go down. I can even shake hands with them. For me, is that not right? Do you think that is wrong that I shake hands with the woman who preaches? God has given us many talented women, too. I don't agree with it. So long as they don't do like this: "I have won the battle for the women!" What? Holst, I don't have any respect for here. She fought a long time, she had fought for it. So long as a woman does not say: "I did it! I have won." That is not pleasing unto God, because He is leading.

AP: Too much pride?

TW: Yes. Self esteem. "I did it, man."

AP: What was that like raising twelve children?

TW: Not an easy job. Now we have all the kind of stuff not to get pregnant. In my time,

we didn't have that. Every time, I was pregnant. But I had my hands like that [on her womb] and I started praying for that child, that the Lord would take care of that child, because I was a little bit worried. That helped. But now, they have all the kind of things not to get pregnant, and they live together. Is that God fearing? They want to find out if they're good together. Do you approve of that?

AP: Well, it sounds like they don't have enough trust in each other.

TW: No. Do you think the One who rules everything, do you not think He rules your life and my life?

AP: Yes, that's everything.

TW: Psalm 139 says: Before the foundation of the Earth, I knew about you. Before you were conceived in your mother's womb, I knew about you. Shouldn't we ask God for a partner? Shouldn't we trust him to bring them just like Rebecca and Jacob? Shouldn't we trust? I don't think I'm wrong. I have grandchildren who live together for years already. They're still living together. My granddaughter, she doesn't want to lose her identity. She wants to stay Susan, and not become his name. When you come at my age, you look at that. But again, I'm old fashioned.

AP: Are there any big events that stand out in your mind, like do you remember when President Kennedy was killed? What was that like?

TW: Oh yes. Sad, sad.

AP: Do you remember what you were doing when you heard?

TW: Yes. My husband was sick. We were living in Graafschap, and accidentally, I put on the television. Then he drove in and we saw him get shot. Nixon. With that

Watergate business. I admired Nixon. In the Vietnam War, he was for the soldiers and instigators. Now they opened the files again. It breaks my heart that man died in peace, Nixon did. But some good went out of it, too, again. Colton came back. From a little mustard seed grows a big plant. President Ford forgave Nixon. The people around were enraged about that. "How can he forgive?" I say, the first commandment, forgive one another if you have sinned. That is Christianity. Then Colton came out to the ministry. A big organization now for Colton. What else struck me so much? Now the paper is full of Clinton.

AP: What do you think of him?

TW: No. I don't think much of him. I don't mean to badmouth. Not like our first president, George Washington, in God we trust.

AP: Do you remember when we landed on the moon?

TW: Yes. That was amazing. John Glenn went around. I followed that program very much. I'm scared. What are they trying to find? What do you think, what are they trying to find?

AP: Out in space? I think, one, they're trying to find a way for people to live out in space. And I think, two, they're trying to find some evidence that says other people have lived out in space.

TW: I think much on when they built the tower in Babylon. They wanted to find...

AP: A way to God, to heaven.

TW: Yes. And one of these days, you will see a deconstruction that will wipe it all away. That's going to be happening. It makes me think the Lord is coming a second time.

It is so clear in the Bible.

AP: So it's like everybody's looking everywhere in all the wrong places?

TW: Yes. But for me it is one thing, that I might be faithful to the end. When I go, I'll tell you, the devil is in troubled waters. All over this world there is trouble.

Trouble, trouble. Water floods, rain, you name it. For me, I guess, He's coming soon. I will be grateful to the end. Jesus said, on the end of an age, will I find faith on each who knows me as a Messiah. Go back to Revelations, and you see the things happening: blood shall flow over the city of Jerusalem. What is it now: blood is flowing over the city of Jerusalem, is it not? This is the end coming. I am not afraid. I only pray that I might be faithful to withstand the evil things of this world that we were talking about. What else? We went to outer space, too, when we talk.

AP: Have any of your children gone to school here, like Hope or Calvin? Where have they gone?

TW: One child is a missionary. He went to Calvin College to the seminary. The other ones, they all have high school educations. They all, this is a miracle for you, in the Netherlands would my children never ever have prospered as they did in America. Never. America is a land where you can get some place.

AP: What would they have done in the Netherlands?

TW: Be just a worker in a factory. I bet they would. But the Netherlands has changed so much, too, now. But there are a bunch who live now. The missionary, he does just like Paul. He makes tents, calls himself a tent maker. But the other ones, there is no need for anything. He's really the only one, the tent maker, I call him. He goes

over the border in Mexico and brings the Gospel there and teaches.

AP: What are some of the things that you're most thankful for in your life?

TW: That I am a child of the King. I'm thankful for, I never dreamt that I'd be sitting here. Look at that. The Lord provided for me, and I give only the thanks to him. Don't I have it nice for an old lady, I think. And that I have my mind yet, get to do things yet, making dolls yet.

AP: You make these?

TW: Yes, I make the body, not the head, of course, but I make the body and the Dutch clothes. I make Raggedy Anne's and Andy's. My grandkids get them. Boy, they get the Andy. Girl, they get the Anne. I made, last week, the bear who sits there. How many are not there who don't have a good mind anymore, who are confused or cannot get around anymore.

AP: Do you crochet?

TW: I crochet, and I knit. Make afghans and all that. It keeps my mind off me and my pain. When you get older, just like me, you have your things, you know. But I keep my mind occupied. It is therapy, you could say. What else? I think that's enough.

AP: Yes, unless there are any other big things you can think of.

TW: You know my foundation. You know a lot of me, what I experienced through the fifty years as an immigrant. Now, you do your thing with it. I try to serve the Lord in these little things, too.