

**EI-416**

**JOHN VANDER PLOEG**

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**THE NETHERLANDS, 1947**

**AGE 30**

**SHIP: "THE LEERDAM"**

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**RESIDENCES:**

- **NETHERLANDS: DeWILP**
- **US: MINNESOTA; GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN; NEW YORK, NY; WAYNE, NJ**

LEVINE: I'm here in the Holland Christian Home on November 30, 1993. Mr. John Vander Ploeg is here, and we're very lucky for the Oral History collection that he happens to be visiting from Michigan just this week. Mr. Vander Ploeg was superintendent for twelve-and-a-half years here at the Holland Christian Home, and moved to Michigan last January, this past January. Mr. Vander Ploeg came from The Netherlands in 1947 when he was thirty years old, and I want to say that I'm very pleased that we happened to cross paths here today. And why don't we start, Mr. Vander Ploeg, by you saying your birth date.

VANDER PLOEG: Thank you. I was born in May 28, 1916.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

VANDER PLOEG: In De Wilp, The Netherlands. The place, the only place that I ever lived.

LEVINE: And could you spell that?

VANDER PLOEG: D-E, and then capital-W-I-L-P. It's a bird's name. It is a bird's name. The town was in low lands. And this --- a water bird, and he was there --- and the town was named after him.

LEVINE: I see. And you lived there, um, did, well, why don't we start with your family. What was your father's name?

VANDER PLOEG: Cornelus.

LEVINE: Cornelus Vander Ploeg.

VANDER PLOEG: Vander Ploeg.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

VANDER PLOEG: Nentje Hoekstra.

LEVINE: Maybe you could spell her name, please.

VANDER PLOEG: N-E-N-T-J-E, and Hoekstra is H-O-E-K-S-T-R-A.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you have brothers and sisters in The Netherlands?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. We had a, our divided family. We had two different, my father

were married for a second time. And so there were three children of four, but one I very shallow remind --- the youngest one --- and several died of the first marriage.

LEVINE: Were you of your father's first marriage?

VANDER PLOEG: Second.

LEVINE: Second. Uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: Second. And we are the three of us; we are still three livin' yet.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. What are the names of the three that . . .

VANDER PLOEG: My brother's --- my sister's name, the oldest one is Gried, G-R-I-E-D. And my brother's name is Geert, that's G-double E-R-T.

LEVINE: And, um, do you remember your childhood in The Netherlands? Do you remember the house you lived in?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. I remember -- well, this is -- of cou--- they told me. When we moved from one town to the other. I was born in De Wilp, but when I was born the house was still being built. And so I was born in [Laughs] tool shed. There I was born. And then later I'm in a house where buildin'. That was the only place I ever lived in --- that same house, which was a farmhouse.

LEVINE: Could you describe what it looked like?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. I could describe the same thing as, but as Vandergoot said, too. There's one building. You have the barn, the front. There was

four rooms in the front. Then there was a section in the middle where there was a bump and a --- a kind of a dip --- a low ---low spot, but also they used for storage. And then the barn. And in the barn you had the cows, and then also the horses, and hay and straw that was only in the back parts ----- of the house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about the kitchen? Do you remember, do you remember the kitchen?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, the kitchen, that was the same place where you live in. The living room and the kitchen was the same place.

LEVINE: And . . .

VANDER PLOEG: And then we had a little house, or a little how you call it. Well, a little building next to the house where my mother would do the cooking in the summertime, so it wouldn't get so awful hot in the house inside. And then we lived there. She did the cooking there, and we also lived in there --- got not sleeping but --- in the daytime.

LEVINE: Well, the living room kitchen of the house, um, was there a stove in that?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes.

LEVINE: What was the stove what was used for fuel for the stove?

VANDER PLOEG: Mostly muck. They made --- they dig that out and they dry it in the sun. And that's what was they used and -- of course -- some wood, and also coal. And then there was that was -- in the ---for the cooking. Then there was another stove with a long stovepipe

standing in the middle of the floor, and that was for heating in the wintertime.

LEVINE: What was that made out of?

VANDER PLOEG: That was metal.

LEVINE: Metal, uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: Metal, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did anybody sleep in that room?

VANDER PLOEG: No.

LEVINE: No.

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. There was a bed. [Laughs] You know – a – a – a --- there was built-in wall. My father and my mother slept in that room.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: And then I was sleeping upstairs as a little boy. But then behind that –well, there was a bedroom. As I said, there were four rooms. There was a bedroom. And then there was what you call the good (?) room where you could come with very good company, but never used otherwise. And then you had the room where we lived and where we cooked and everything. And then there was another one behind there where they did laundry and things like that.

LEVINE: Hmm. And do you remember the furnishings in the room where you

only went when you had good company?

VANDER PLOEG: They had upholstered chairs and a table, and some pictures on the wall, and a little stove also -- heating stove --- in the corner which could be used.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember what occasions people would come when you would use that particular room?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, if there was my father's family --- if they came from further away, and they came further --- no (?), let me say, then they would use it. Not in the daytime. But if they --- If they really came to face it, then they would sit over there and they would face it with each other. And -- of course -- then we children came --- the two of them. And we -- usually, we would get something to eat or to drink, we were sent into the other room again. [Laughs] So this thing didn't get dirty.

LEVINE: Would the adults eat in that room? Would they eat food in that special room?

VANDER PLOEG: No, not, no. Not, not, that -- that would be done in a -- an living room. But that they would drink coffee and tea like that. And then usually -- of course -- the whole room was full of smoke [Laughs] because they smoked a cigar, or a pipe, or something like that. It was just like very common, that was the only thing.

LEVINE: Most of the men smoked pipes or cigars?

VANDER PLOEG: Oh, yes, yes. I was twelve years old, and I got a little pipe for my birthday. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Huh. Was that typical for that age?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes, yes, yes. That was part of being a man, you must be smokin'. But then I was fourteen years old and I had stomach ulcers. And then the home doctor said --- well, he said we operate on one place, they start maybe on another place. So I suffered when I'm four--fourteen years, stomach ulcers. And was always on a diet on account of that. And then the doctor forbid me smoking, so I didn't smoke too much in those years.

LEVINE: So, um, what about food? Do you remember certain dishes that your mother made?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, potatoes was the big thing in Holland and it still is --- and vegetables, but homegrown vegetables --- like kale and cabbage and carrots and turnips. And there was the vegetables served with the potatoes, and my father was very a --- to take it with meat. He wanted to have some meat, not much, but he wanted to have some meat with every meal. And then my mother made gravy, of course.

LEVINE: How would she cook the potatoes?

VANDER PLOEG: She would cook them. And then when they were done, she would run the water off, and then put them back on the stove again and dry them. So they would be really dry, and then she would shake them. And some of the flour would be on the outside, so that they -- they were really --- looked very attractive, let me say, appetizing.

VANDER PLOEG: [Interposed] That's the way -- she would always do that

LEVINE: [Superposed] Uh-huh, uh-huh. So she would have them on top of

the stove?

VANDER PLOEG: On top of the stove, on top of the stove.

LEVINE: And they would be crispy, would they be? Not crispy.

VANDER PLOEG: Not crispy, but because of the dryness --- and as you were shakin', then some of the flour of the potato --- because you would have some that would get on your outside. So you would not be shiny and wet. It would be nice and dry.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about desserts? Were you a family of dessert eaters, or not?

VANDER PLOEG: The only dessert we had was on Sunday. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. What might you have?

VANDER PLOEG: And it was always pudding, always pudding. And then sometimes with some plums with the juice, or peaches or something like that with it. But most of the time just pudding, plain pudding.

LEVINE: What would it be, like vanilla pudding?

VANDER PLOEG: Vanilla pudding, right, right. And very, very --- with chocolate pudding, but that was special, very special.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now, were you a religious family?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. We were always brought up to go to school. But the Sunday school, we did not have over there in our church. Later on my sister

went to a Sunday school, but it was in a different place. But our church – in those days was the church the children belong in the same church as the adults do. And – of cau--- later on when you got a little older, catechism classes and education. And we always had-- the young people --- they call 'em *knapen verenigen* -- they would have a teacher. Usually, a schoolteacher who would --- gave the lesson, and an open Bible discussion --- could ask questions and everything.

And later on when you become sixteen years old, you will go to the young people's society. And there you had the same thing. But then we --- one had to introduce the lesson and the Bible. And then after that we had recess, and then we would study politics and history and social problems. But it was all done among the young people, and usually was one of the one people themselves. And there again, quite often a schoolteacher, but who would still be single. And he would arrange the discussion.

LEVINE: This would be on Sunday?

VANDER PLOEG: No the -- the, yes. That was on Sunday evening, yes, right. Usually the younger ones was right after church, and then the other ones they come at seven, seven-thirty, something like that --- in the evening.

LEVINE: And this was the reformed . . .

VANDER PLOEG: Christian Reformed, here. (?) *Amerika* there. Yeah.

LEVINE: And, um, and how about school itself?

VANDER PLOEG: And the school was the same thing. That was also Christian school. Every morning we would have a Bible lesson. There were bri---- Tte teacher would start with that. And then every Monday we had to recite a psalm, a Dutch psalm, every Monday morning. I mean you had to memorize it, and say it. All the classes were opened by prayer, and closed.

LEVINE: Were the boys and girls together?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes.

LEVINE: In the school?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes, and two grades in one room with a blackboard. And – of course –then first, when they started ----later with more paper, but when we started they were still on slate --- writing on slate and wipe it out again, you know. And then sometimes, they say --- well. you have two grades, but we never had any trouble. You just ---- the teacher would put one grade to work, and then he would maybe discuss the lesson on the other side and you wouldn't pay any attention to it. You had your own work, I mean, there was no interference, that they would have ---- in singin' and things like that, it would go (?)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you remember particularly how the school was conducted? Was it conducted in a strict manner, or what do you remember about school?

VANDER PLOEG: Strict, very strict.

LEVINE: In what way?

VANDER PLOEG: The teacher didn't ask any questions. The teacher were boss. And I had one teacher who was not afraid to spank in school either. He would just get them over his knee. [Laughs] He had, he had discipline, but that same teacher, he – he also had a uh, (?) agriculture, and by the farm community. And if any of the farmers had a disease in the crop or something like that, they went to him. So all, people loved him, and he never had trouble. He could do whatever with the kids what he wanted to.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: And he was an excellent teacher. Especially over there in around Christmas, the days were very short, you know. There's just no [Not understood] and then maybe a half an hour before quitting time, say, "Just put your work away." and he would fill his old pipe with tobacco, [Laughs] just put a leg over the bench, sit on the front of the desk and tell a story. That were the best, best hours in school. He was excellent in that.

LEVINE: What was his name, this teacher?

VANDER PLOEG: Vanderverf.

LEVINE: V-E-R-V-E?

VANDER PLOEG: F. Vander, just like mine, and on verf, V-E-R-F.

LEVINE: F, uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: But then we had more teachers, too. But, I mean, there were the principal. And there's the ---we were --but we had three-room school,

and then two grades in every room.

LEVINE: Was storytelling a big, a big thing, as you recall from your youth?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes, it was, and especially teachers, every morning they had a Bible story. And they were not reading the Bible. They had studied, and they brought it really in a story and brought it home to the children. That was always one of the big things, every morning.

LEVINE: And the stories that Mr. Vanderverf told you, what kinds of stories would they be?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, they would just follow the Bible, like the parables of Jesus and his teachings, and -- of course -- the Christmas story. And the prophets, maybe of the Old Testament, things like that.

LEVINE: Hmm. How did you celebrate Christmas?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, [Laughs] my father said Christmas had nothing to do with the Christmas tree. [Laughs] So no decorations in our house, and no Christmas tree, but just the real Christmas story, Christ being born in Bethlehem. And that was ---- it's slowly on it ---gets over there, too, but in Christmas you wouldn't see any lights or anything like that. Theyre were only a couple places they would have a Christmas tree, but very seldom.

LEVINE: Would families get together?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes, yes. They would get together. But, see, over there we had Santa Claus, and that is the fifth of December. He would come the night between the fifth and the sixth, and then would the children get

presents, not at Christmas.

LEVINE: What did you, what was Santa Claus? What did Santa Claus mean to you as a child?

VANDER PLOEG: Santa Claus, he came from Spain. I mean, that is the story. And he was a real old man with a long beard. Then he had a helper, who was usually black, Pete, was with him. And then it comes to about -- we had a very nice remembrance of Santa Claus, because a niece of my mother was schoolteacher. And she played Santa Claus with a mask and everything, and my sister was the black Pete. [Laughs] And we really believed in Santa Claus. And she came, and Santa Claus knew everything -- you know -- what we had done also. And this Santa Claus told him what we had done. [Both laugh] And we had one problem. Every time when Santa Claus came, my sister was gone. She was visiting. And then she would come home and say, "Oh, no, again! See, I missed Santa Claus." And oh God, we feelin' bad for her, you know but she was Peter. [Laughs] So we, but, see, there is just you know we had different mothers, and so being younger than the older ones.

LEVINE: I see. And this sister was one of the older ones.

VANDER PLOEG: She was one of the older ones.

LEVINE: That would play Santa Claus.

VANDER PLOEG: Right, right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what kinds of presents would Santa Claus bring you?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, very simple, like a little wooden horse and things like that, and candy -- of course -- but no big presents. All small stuff. And a little doll for the girls, and things like that. Usually one or two at the most, and then they would come, he would have a really --- a burlap bag. And then people take it out there, and the name, and Santa Claus knew all thing what we had done and -- of course -- the way we had been naughty. He would tell us, and we would be better. You know.  
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Now, had you seen black people, besides Santa Claus' helper?

VANDER PLOEG: Once. Once we had, see. Holland had Indonesia that was a Dutch colony. And once I saw one from Indonesia who came to The Netherlands, and he taught in our school -- tell us something. Just once I saw one who was dark skinned.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: Yeah.

LEVINE: And so then would there be, like, a feast, or a big dinner at, when Santa Claus day was, or . . .

VANDER PLOEG: No. That happened in the evening, after supper. And, no, it was not a big, big feast. But for the children -- of course -- was a very big thing, because you wouldn't get presents over there every day like they do over here. But it would be very special. The only thing you would get something on your birthday or at Santa Claus.

LEVINE: And how about birthdays? Were they celebrated much the same as they are here, or was there any difference in that?

VANDER PLOEG: More simple, more simple. And sometimes they did it when you had a birthday, and they would have that heart cake, and they would tie it on your arm above your elbow, and then you could eat it off your arm.  
[Both laugh]

LEVINE: The birthday person would get a little cake.

VANDER PLOEG: The birth --- the birthright, would get it on a, it was a strip ---a strip cake, you know -- and tie it on the arm and they cut it and then you tie it on the arm could eat it off the arm. But there was one thing, when I came here --- you know, then I came to my brother in Minnesota. And then he in the spring we went to the field, and they still had horses there, and they brought me coffee in the field with cake. Well, that was something unheard of. You would get a sandwich, but to get cake in the field [Both laugh] that was completely out of this world.

LEVINE: Well, now, your father was a farmer?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes, yes. We were born and raised on a farm.

LEVINE: And did you did you, what did your father grow for, for a cash crop?

VANDER PLOEG: Uh, well, see, we --- it was dairy, mainly. But we always had oats and rye and later sometimes barley or wheat. But --- and potatoes. That was what we grew, outside of grass. But then, see, you harvest it, but then the straw and everything was used again, and not only for bedding, but even for animals to eat.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So your mattresses would be straw?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. Uh, we had one bed had springs, but then you would have springs and not a, --- not covered with anything. But then a bed on there with feathers --- a feather bed would be laying on there --- and there what you lay on. And we had one bed that had straw, and then sometimes they put chaff in a bag -- you know -- and they were laying on top of the straw. There we was sleeping on it. But no heat in your bedroom, of course. And sometimes because you had a tile roof, that the snow would blow in there. [Laughs] The bed used to have snow on the floor. That would be ---- that happened in the wintertime once in a while.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you, did you skate and go sledding and things like that?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. Skating -- there was ---even, oh, I would say about, about two miles from school --- always walk. But in the wintertime when there was ice, we had canals --- no lakes, but canals. Then we would skate to school. Then we would have barefooted, usually put another extra pair of socks on, on the skates. And then put the wooden shoes on our arm, and then we would skate to school. And then take the skates off and put the wooden shoes on and you walk.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Let's see. Is there anything else that you can remember doing for enjoyment as a child?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, we did some -- you know --soccer that was quite -- you know -- kids -- not have a soccer team, but to play in a field and things like

that -- just soccer and fishing in a canals, with a fishing pole and things like that. And on a bike -- say, once every year we would go on a bike -- the young people -- on a trip, but always on a bike. Then on Easter and on Christmas we had two holidays. We had the first Christmas they call, and the second Christmas.Day. And then usually on the second day, then they would have choirs, and they would give a, uh . . .

LEVINE: Like a concert?

VANDER PLOEG: Yeah, a concert, right. And you would go to a concert, and things like that. And the—then -- then on Easter, which was in the spring --- and they had that outside, and then the people would go there. And at Pentecost we had two days too. And then they would have it outside in the woods. And the young people would go there, and -- of course -- a lot of boys and girls found each other. [Laughs] And (?). But there was, but that was just about all the occasion. Work was the main thing there.

LEVINE: Do you remember your chores, from the time you were a little boy on up?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes. Feeding the young stock and the horses and things like that, and the sooner you gonna help to milk the cows by hand. But always the chores had to be done.

LEVINE: Did you do chores before you went to school?

VANDER PLOEG: Not much, I don't think. But when I went to school, what I still remembered to ---- over there to feed the young, the calves, especial. And then we had to go in from the back, and then you were

not strong enough, and then always – and then you would get some of the slop or something like that you had, and you would sure get wet and things like that. That happened, because you were not strong enough to -- to really master it. So not too often they did things like that. I still remember one time we had two horses and we had to go around yet with the [Not understood]. And it was time for milking, so my father and my older brother, they went milking, and they had to go once around. [Laughs]

So you said, "You do that." And I went around; twice we had to go around. I went around with the horses, but the horses wanted to go home, [Laughs] and I didn't have enough strength to pull the lines hard enough. So we just unhooked and we went home unfinished).

So I wasn't too old when that happened. Then one time we were in a barn. It was on a Sunday. My sister and I -- and I had my fingers in, with a threshing machine in those (?) wheels. You had -- you know – the one wheel in the other, the gears. And my sister pulled the belt, and I got my fingers in between there. And then I was in bed crawling from pain, and they said, "No I can never drive the horses again." [Laughs] That was the biggest worry. See, my finger's still crumbled. You never went to a doctor, even. The thing had broken in two places, here and there. But we went never to the doctor. If people over there, when they were sick and they were going to the hospital, well, then you would almost say, "Well, that is the end."

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE:

Did --- what kind of medicine was practiced? Were there folk --- was there a kind of folk medicine that people used? Do you remember anything like that?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes, not much. They were to go to the doctor. But, see, we had a family doctor -- you know -- the doctor would come and visit. And they had, the doctor and the veterinarian, they had a car. They were the only cars in the county. And they had a bike on the back of the car, and then they would go to a certain place, and then they would use the bike to go from one house to the other.

LEVINE: Do you remember any illnesses and their treatment that you, that you experienced as a boy?

VANDER PLOEG: I know had the measles. But -- of course -- I didn't need a doctor. And later on, but that was in the wartime, when I had my stomach operation. I never had any trouble, but that was in '42, so that was just a few years before I came here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, um, let's see. So tell me about the war years. Where, how did it affect you personally?

VANDER PLOEG: They were bad. The main thing was -- you know -- everything that the, the German soldiers, we didn't have much to do with them. The worst ones was the Dutch people who were on the German side, let me say, who joined with the Germans. And they were the ones who we had most trouble with. But, like, in a wartime -- you know -- the Germans, they came, or they sent some Dutch people do it, but still was a member in Germans. And they would estimate the grain field before harvesting how much grain would come in the field, and they would go all to Germany. And so when a threshing time came, then I always, and I mostly did it personally, half we dug out and they went to Germany, and the other half I put under the floor. I hid, and then the people from around ---- because--- not the ones around us who had farm, and they didn't need it --- but from the city of Groningen.

And they came all the way. There was at least twenty --- oh, no, about fifteen miles, on a bike --- just for a little bit rye, or a little bit wheat, and things like that. And milk, on Saturday. All our milk was always gone.

LEVINE: You would sell it to people from the city?

VANDER PLOEG: Sell it --sell, yeah. Right. They would come. And --- of course, if you would be caught with things like that --- it would be only little thing --- it would be one step to the concentration camp.

LEVINE: Did you ever personally know of people who were caught?

VANDER PLOEG: My close—my closest friend died in a concentration camp two days before the liberation. [Sobs] And what happened -- see, we heard the news; we heard the news from England ---- because the Germans, they always wrong. But we heard the news from England, and they distorted that -- the line. But then sometimes they planted it -- you know -- to let other ones know what really the real news was --- and that was typed. And so they went searching for it, and finally they said it was typed on his typewriter. And he was sent to Germany just for that, and never came back home again. We also had in a neighbor town --- when the Germans came in, they let the Dutch soldiers go home, free. They could go home to their own place. Then in '42 ---- that was in '40 -- then in '42 the Germans got short on help in the factories and things like that because all the men were on the front. So they demanded the soldiers to come back and work in the German factories.

Then -- of course -- all those soldiers, instead of going to Germany, they were hiding away from the German. We had two, at home. But,

anyway on that four--- in '42 --- when the Germans announced it, then the whole country was on a strike completely. No milk got delivered, everything. So then the German -- they were tense and they were patrolling the road, and there was a tree across the road when they came there. So they kept on, by foot, they were kept on walking. They pull the tree out the road, and they kept on walking.

When they came back, the tree was over the road again. Some of our people had done that. And from that point on --- to the camp, the Germans took everybody inside. And there was even a boy -- who was sitting outside --- were fourteen years old with a sore-- sore foot, but they took him along, too. There were fifteen people shot, who had nothing to do with the incident. [Sobs] Yes. Killed them cold-blooded. And things like that happened. And then -- you know -- I said, we had two who supposed to work in Germany. And if you were in an area where they were none working along with the Germans, then you were pretty safe. If they worked in the field and things like that.

But in the underground, they were always active. And they had also their spies. And they said, well, be careful because that night or in that week they mi—they can come around for searching houses. And then they would sleep in a secret place that it would be hidden, where you couldn't find them that night. And other things was -- you know -- if you had those boys, they wouldn't have ration cards. But the Dutch people --- they of the underground -- they were robbing cards from the offices. And so they distri-- by underground, they were distributors against over here. We had ration cars also for those. Because -- you know -- everything was on ration, everything you could think of. And so if you would have ration cards -- you know -- you would be shot by for everything.

So that is, that was (?). Yeah. One thing in a wartime, because you had also deliver so much meat. You know, so many cows you had, okay, so many you ha--- so much meat you had to deliver to Germany. And there, again, the -- you know, --- you didn't want to give the good stuff, the best. At one time we had a bull, and he was a kind of a ---- well, he was no danger to us at all. We could do anything better. But, I mean, acted that way. And so we said, "Well, if -- then it has to go to Germany." But we didn't want it to. We wanted to keep it.

So the veterinarian came and just like I said, veterinarian and the doctor, they had a car. And so that car came in a driveway which was completely stained, and the bull just stood there -- you know -- [Laughs] making noise and throwing the dirt. So the veterinarian says, "No." he said, "that animal is dangerous." So we had to kill him in a field. And -- of course -- because he was killed in the field, it couldn't go to Germany. So that meat stays in The Netherlands. But because he was dangerous and we got credit for it, so we didn't have ---- we could keep 'em from the other cows. Things like that happened.

LEVINE: Well, how about going in the service? Were you in the service?

VANDER PLOEG: After the war, I was in -- a volunteer. Not as a -- not as a -- no, I wasn't called for service. But after the war-- see, I said it --- Indonesia was a Dutch colony. And so, after the war -- then the Dutch had an army, and they were going to Indonesia. And I was planning to go there, too. But then instead --- because I had an operation on my stomach, the doctor said, "No, you'd better not." So then I stayed in The Netherlands. And I said I don't want to be in the

army. So I went back home again.

LEVINE: Now, um, what was, what were the circumstances under which you decided to come to the United States?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, that was just about the circumstance. See, after the war, everything is in a mess. I mean, everything is flat. You have to start all the way from the bottom. And then I had one brother, he is in the States in Minnesota, and he came over to The Netherlands to see how we had survived the war. And then he said to me --- I really had no plans to immigrate --- but then he said to me, he said, "Wouldn't you feel like coming to America?"

LEVINE: Now, is this an older brother from . . . ?

VANDER PLOEG: That was an older brother. That was the oldest of the, of the whole family.

LEVINE: And what was his name?

VANDER PLOEG: Dick. Dick. And then he wanted to take me along, but he had to make out the affidavit by the bank and everything and that must be done personally. He couldn't do it from The Netherlands. So then I -- he made it right away, work of that, and sent me the papers. And then I applied, and I got to The Netherlands. But th-- in those days, you could not take any money along. They figured out over there how much it would cost me from New York to Minneapolis, and that was all the Dutch --- the American money I could get out of the country. So then I was on that boat, and then just like I said were the layer down.

LEVINE: First tell me how, when you left, what was leaving like, leaving your family home?

VANDER PLOEG: For me --- my mother, she had a hard time. But for me, just to go to a new country -- you know -- the future --- you look at, you're really anxious to get there. And so, but -- of course -- for the end --- by that time it had changed a little bit. When my brother left it was in '20, after the First World War. Then my father said, "Now I buried a son alive." [Sobs] But when I left, there was a possibility that you would be coming back -- you know -- the traffic was different. There were no planes at all then yet, but later on -- of course -- planes came.

LEVINE: What was your brother doing in Minnesota?

VANDER PLOEG: He was a farmer also.

LEVINE: A farmer, uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: He was a farmer. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And so he had, he had gone and he had his own land, his own farm?

VANDER PLOEG: He had his own farm, yes. I came there the first of April. That was another thing. I came --- in the first place we were on a boat, and the boat always did it in twelve days normally. And we ran from one storm into the other, and, -- see --- we were on the ocean for sixteen days, four days overtime.

LEVINE: Where did you leave from?

VANDER PLOEG: I left from Rotterdam.

LEVINE: And, and . . .

VANDER PLOEG: To New York, to Hoboken.

LEVINE: And do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

VANDER PLOEG: Yes, very much so. And we were a little too late to go into the harbor, too late . . .

LEVINE: In the day, uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: In the daytime. And so we had to overnight on the river. And I still see the lights, because it was right after the war that everything was dark -- you know -- in Holland, you had to have (?) black paper so that no light would shine out, and then there's New York City. It was amazing. And then also Hoboken, you couldn't see --- just the lights, you know. So then in the morning I thought now I want to see, when we came on the (?), now I want to see what looked so beautiful last night. [Laughs] And I was very disappointed.

LEVINE: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

VANDER PLOEG: Pardon?

LEVINE: Did you see the Statue of Liberty when you first came in?

VANDER PLOEG: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, yes. And we talked about the island --- but if our papers were good, we didn't have to go. But if --- otherwise, I would have been on the island, too. If there was anything wrong with my papers, or I got sick -- that they did --- if there was any waiting

period, then they would have sent us to the island.

LEVINE: Did you know any English when you came?

VANDER PLOEG: Not a word.

LEVINE: And you were . . .

VANDER PLOEG: I -- I can, I never had more (?) of one dollar. They came on the boat and they asked us who had somebody to pick them up. And I told them my brother. I was big. I said, "I get there." But I was not so sure myself, because I didn't know any English, nothing. But anyway, I paid that dollar, and then they said we would take care of me. And my brother had sent a check to the Seaman's Home, a hundred dollars, so I had a little bit money then, too.

LEVINE: Where was the Seaman's Home?

VANDER PLOEG: In Hoboken, in Hoboken. But, anyway, they brought me on the train there --- Reverend Krasman [ph], who was from the church. And I was on that train, and in Holland you get a ticket, and you keep that ticket. But over here I didn't know anything about it, and then they took a piece of paper off that all the time. And they put a little colored card in front of the window. And they were traveling -- and I was traveling two nights and a day in that train all the time, and you are so afraid. They came around with food, but I didn't know what to call it. And so you think, will I survive? So I was hungry [Laughs] when I was in Minnesota. Because you don't -- you are afraid of everything.

When I had to go to the bathroom, I watched where the men went,

because men in Holland is N-A-N, not M-E-N, and women is frau, so it was completely different. So that -- you know -- but you are not sure of yourself at all. But then, anyway, we came in Chicago, and there they had to go from one station to the other. And there was one standing on the sidewalk when I came out of the train, and asking for my name. He helped me with all my baggage in the station. Couldn't talk to him, but I could understand my name. When it was time for the train to leave again, there the same man was again and he helped me in a yellow cab. A yellow cab brought me to the other station, and there was one asking for my name again, and help me on the train.

LEVINE: Now, how was that arranged?

VANDER PLOEG: That was, that is a society here for strangers. There was all voluntary labor, and there was -- there was excellent, excellent.

LEVINE: Now, did you, when you came you were traveling alone the whole way?

VANDER PLOEG: All the way.

LEVINE: On the ship?

VANDER PLOEG: All the way, all the way -- alone, yeah. All the way alone.

LEVINE: Wow.

VANDER PLOEG: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, so your brother had contacted this society for, that helped . . .

VANDER PLOEG: No. They came on a boat before we left the boat, and they asked if there was anybody who needed help. And then they asked us for one dollar. And then my brother had contacted the minister of the Seamens Home to send him a telegram to come on a train, so he did. But then these other people -- those volunteers -- they sent a telegram from Chicago to my brother that I was coming. And I came in [Not understood] in --- on a Sunday morning, and on Monday morning we got a telegram here from the Seaman's Home. So I would have been in big trouble over there, because I would have sit there not knowing where to go or what. But because the other one --- the volunteers --- they sent to my brother, he knew I was coming in.

LEVINE: What were your impressions coming from Hoboken, going from Hoboken to Minnesota in this new country? Do you remember any impressions?

VANDER PLOEG: A little bit of it. For one thing, in Holland you --- they cut a grain, and then they put it in shucks. But I had never seen corn. I didn't know anything about corn. So I saw the shucks of corn in the field; but I thought it was grain, like oats or wheat. And I thought, "Oh, that is all wasted, because that gets wet that starts to grow into . . ." And I couldn't figure it out. I thought, "Boy, this is America?" [Laughs] They can't even get the grain out of the field. But I, of course --- later on I found out it was corn, but that was one of the impressions that I remember.

Being a farmer -- you know -- those things that you can't understand how they handle it. I was at my brother's farm, and I said I was working with the horses. And then I told you about the cake already in the field, right? But, anyway, then there was a car coming down

the road and he stopped. And out in the field with the horses, I thought, "Boy that is somebody who's going to ask where he has to go." And I didn't know anything. [Laughs] So I got [Not understood] on that horse and, "Giddyup," and I went to the far corner of the field and I stayed there until the man left with the car. [Both laugh] I was afraid that he would call me.

LEVINE: How was learning English for you? Do you remember any incidents when you were learning English, or when English began to click for you?

VANDER PLOEG: But I can tell you. My brother and his wife, they never talked any Dutch in the house. He had one son who was about eighteen and the other fifteen. Then I came there and -- of course -- we talked Dutch. And I was there for about a half a year, and those boys, they could talk Dutch pretty good. [Laughs] But I didn't know any English. Then from there on I went to a neighbor town, and there I came in contact with a farmer, and he didn't know any Dutch. So then I started to --- started to talk English a little bit or I could. Then in Holland already, I always had decided to go into the ministry.

And I told it to my brother. "Well," he said, "then maybe you should go to the Reformed Bible Institute in Grand Rapids." So he wrote there. And I worked that summer in Hollandale [ph] with the main thing was I had Mexicans and Indians who work in the field there, and I had to bring them water and watch them do work. I was their boss. They didn't know any English, and [Laughs] I didn't know any English. But, anyway, we got to go and so this is the way I hassled through the --- that summer.

And then in September I went to Grand Rapids, to the Reformed

Bible Institute. And then the first year the teacher said, "Well, you can write your exams in Dutch," because they knew a little bit Dutch. But that was the end. And then -- you know -- if you're daily going to school --- but first when I started out they had an English-Dutch dictionary. And then I --- in the book --- I could see how the word was spelled, looked it up in the dictionary, and then I saw in Dutch what it meant. [Laughs] But it is so time-consuming.

LEVINE: It must have been difficult to be in school like that.

VANDER PLOEG: It was.

LEVINE: Without knowing . . .

VANDER PLOEG: But just because you have to, it -- it --it goes --- then it goes quite fast.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, well, let's see. We have about a little over five minutes left. How about telling me, um, so you worked on the farm at first.

VANDER PLOEG: Right.

LEVINE: And then you went to the Bible Institute.

VANDER PLOEG: Right, right.

LEVINE: And then how long did you stay there?

VANDER PLOEG: I graduated from there. And then I went to Calvin College for two years, and from there on I went to New York City. I didn't graduate from college, but I went to New York City as a volunteer to work in

Harlem, New York among black. And I was there about a half year, and then the mission board appointed two girls to work there also, and one of them became my wife. [Catches breath]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your wife's name and maiden name?

VANDER PLOEG: Elsie Coop was her name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so when did you get married, then?

VANDER PLOEG: And we got married in Harlem. And there we vowed, we were working there, and we got married there, and then there was struggle in the church. It didn't work out the way we expected.

LEVINE: What church was that, in Harlem?

VANDER PLOEG: There was ---there was ---- well, the Mid-Harlem Community Chapel, they called it first.

LEVINE: Met?

VANDER PLOEG: Mid.

LEVINE: Mid.

VANDER PLOEG: Mid-Harlem.

LEVINE: Mid, uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: Community Chapel. That was the name when it started. And later on it became The Chu --- [Not understood] The Christian Reformed

Church of Manhattan. But, anyway, when we were there – then we went to --- back to Michigan, and I was there for a little while. And I didn't --- I work --- I always had a job. I mean, I didn't care what I was doing. I mean --- I always could find work to do.

LEVINE: Were you always working with the church in one-way or another?

VANDER PLOEG: Then, no. Then I was not with the church anymore. And we were married and we had been in Michigan for about three years --- we lived there. And both children were born there.

LEVINE: And tell me your children's names?

VANDER PLOEG: Cornelus, after my father --- the one, and the other is Mary Sue. Cornelus Henry is his name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And Mary Sue.

VANDER PLOEG: And Mary Sue.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And you were . . .

VANDER PLOEG: And then we came back here again, and then I was planning to get acquainted with the American way of farming and become a farmer. But after we had been here over a couple of months, my wife had never been on a farm before. I said to her, "Well," I said, "I promise you one thing. This is the first and last year on a farm." And then I became a carpenter. And then over here in the Holland home they needed a superintendent and we applied. And then I looked at it, and we had a little apartment over there. I said, "Just forget about us." Because there was no room for two children here. So.

But then my son got married and my daughter went to college, and we were together. My wife was driving a school bus and -- you know -- we -- I was working -- and I got old, the work didn't -- you know -- not so easy any more. And so we said we sell our house, because we had built my own house ----- we sell our house and we buy a duplex in Michigan and can do a little bit and everything will be fine. And then we mention that to my son and his wife one evening, and then she was here part-time working in the kitchen. And she said, "Ooh," she said, "If Mr. Vogel would know that," who was the administrator, "he would love to have you." And instead of going to Michigan we sold our house and we went here to Holland Home. And we were here . . .

LEVINE: And stayed twelve-and-a-half years.

VANDER PLOEG: For twelve-and-a-half years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VANDER PLOEG: And then we had planned to retire together, and then -- of course -- my wife passed away very unexpected with heart attack.

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you have children? I mean, do you have grandchildren?

VANDER PLOEG: Two. Three. My daughter has two little girls, and my son has one here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And just, our time is just about over, but how do you feel about having come to this country when you were thirty years old, and then living the rest of your life here?

VANDER PLOEG: Well, I think, great. I would never feel home in The Netherlands again. I go there. Well, when -- while we were here we had one month of vacation. We will get --- every other year we would go to The Netherlands and visit my brother and sister, and things like that. Once then we made a trip in Europe. But I would never feel home in The Netherlands again to stay there, because everything is so much more roomier here, and so many more opportunities. There's no comparison to me.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, perhaps that's a good place to end.

VANDER PLOEG: Laughs]

LEVINE: I want to thank you so much for a most interesting interview. I'm very happy that I had the chance to talk with you, and your tape will be in the Ellis Island collection.

VANDER PLOEG: Okay.

LEVINE: So I've been speaking with John Vander Ploeg, and he came from The Netherlands in 1947 when he was thirty years old, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on November 30, 1993, and I'm signing off.

VANDER PLOEG: And he got married when he was forty years old. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Okay. Thank you, thank you.