

EI-562

DESIRE ANTOINE DE VRIES

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: ANNE BOULEY, 11/1997

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FRANCE, 1912

AGE 7

PASSAGE ON "THE STATENDAM"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: This transcript was prepared by Anne Bouley, a Massachusetts parent who contacted me in the fall of 1997 to obtain a suitable oral history interview for her daughter to incorporate into a school history project. The interview had not been transcribed at that point and was supplied to Mrs. Bouley as an audio tape. At my request, Mrs. Bouley graciously consented to donate a printed copy of the transcript she had prepared for her daughter's use. This printed copy was then retyped and reconceived into the appropriate computer program by Oral History Project volunteer Chick Lemonick. As a final step, I reviewed the text and made corrections and additions wherever necessary. Many thanks to Mrs. Bouley for her hard work! Paul E. Sigrist, Jr. Director of Oral History, 3/10/1998.

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist, for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, November 11th, 1994. I'm in Holyoke, Massachusetts with Desire De Vries.

DE VRIES: Right.

SIGRIST: Mr. De Vries came from France in 1912. He was seven years old when he came to the United States. For the sake of the tape, you may hear a canary singing. (they laugh) Mr. De Vries has a canary named Petie and Petie is singing in the background. Anyway, Mr. De Vries, thank you for having me over this morning.

Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

DE VRIES: February 16, 1905.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

DE VRIES: In Roubaix, France

SIGRIST: Can you spell Roubaix?

DE VRIES: R-O-U-B-A-I-X.

SIGRIST: Where in France is that?

DE VRIES: In northern France, right near the Belgian border.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the town?

DE VRIES: Well, it's not a town, it is a big city. It, at one time was a leading center of the textile industries, and the reason why we came over here, there was a, well, there was a lull in the place out there and they were losing jobs, no work. And we had a few relatives living over here in Holyoke and they were Belgian, born in France, and they were all weavers and spinners, but mostly weaving. And Holyoke at one time was the leading center of the textile industry in this country, the Farr Alpaca Company. So, they all...

SIGRIST: (misunderstanding) What, the file...?

DE VRIES: Farr, F, F-A-R-R Alpaca Company. They were making like the linings, like alpaca for the, for the suits and like, well, anyway, they were pretty busy and it was such a big place. And where, where the folks were working, after I, I had to go there too, there must have been about two, three hundred looms and they were all making that bangity, bangity, bang noise all day long and you had to read each others lips in order to communicate,

you know. So that's why I can read lips even today
sometimes. (he laughs) I am getting so I, I can't, I
can't hear much either, but like I said, nobody was
protected for, for hearing loss. All you heard was that
noise, you know.

SIGRIST: So this was a common problem in the mills?

DE VRIES: Yes, right, especially in there, because there was so
much noise.

SIGRIST: Let's go back to France.

DE VRIES: Okay.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the town? When you think
about the town, what sticks out in your mind?

DE VRIES: Well, the people and, of course, I still had relatives
over there. We went back a few times, the wife and
I. We visited in '70, '70 and '74.

SIGRIST: But as a child, what do you remember...

DE VRIES: Oh, as a child?

SIGRIST: ... as a child that sticks out in your mind?

DE VRIES: Well, I remember I used to wear wooden shoes and when it rained we used to float them down the gutter. (he laughs) And, uh, but then I went to school, like kindergarten, you know. And , and for lunch, instead of milk we had beer, a small goblet of beer. And my mother used to know some of the women working there, so I used to get two. (he laughs) And later, when I changed from that school to another, a higher grade, we started to carry our lunch and I had a little canteen and that we filled with beer, too. That's a national drink out there.

SIGRIST: Now you said you were right near the Belgian border.

DE VRIES: Right.

SIGRIST: Were most of the people that lived in the town French or were some of them Belgian people too?

DE VRIES: There were both and there were a lot of mixed too. Did

you know anything about Belgium?

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what you, what you remember.

DE VRIES: Well, like I say, they were adjacent to where I lived in Roubaix and there was a lot of smuggling. They go in Belgium, buy things and smuggle them in France. And I remember some of the friends of the family were smugglers. They used to go and carry the stuff back and then they used to have dogs. They used to load them up with harnesses and put on coffee and things like that and send them home. A lot of them got through and a lot of them didn't, you know, there used to be all these custom officers on the line there.

SIGRIST: And what were some of things that were illegal to bring across the border?

DE VRIES: I don't think there was too much.

SIGRIST: What were people smuggling? What items were people smuggling back and forth?

DE VRIES: Coffee, things like that, but mostly coffee and whatever

they were buying, I don't know, they thought it was, everything was cheaper in Belgium than it was in France, so whatever they could smuggle they did. Of course, a lot of them got caught and they just take the goods away from them. They didn't arrest them or anything. They just took the stuff away from them.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the house that you lived in, in France?

DE VRIES: Yes, it was like a court, uh, two, it was built like court. Like this. (he gestures) You would come in from the street, there was like a long corridor and then there is a whole court all around like that. Two, two flights and of course an attic and that's what I visited when we went back there because I still had my aunt living there.

SIGRIST: What do you remember as a child about...

DE VRIES: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: ...the house? What was your favorite part of the house?

DE VRIES: Well, I don't remember too much because I was out of it all the time. But, it was a two flo-, two story. It was like a Phila-, Philadelphia cottage, like they have over here, you know. But I remember one Christmas I in a, I was, just after taking a bath. My sister and my mother was there. And we heard a knock on the door. And we had a dog, a terrier. And we heard a knock on the door and my mother said, "I wonder who that is?" So, she says, "Come in," in French, so we open the door and it was my uncle dressed up like Santa Claus and he says (he laughs), "Is there any good little children in this house?" And as soon as he said those words the dog we had ran after him (he laughs) and chased him out. We said, "Oh, that was Uncle Albert." (he laughs) So that was the end of that Christmas anyway.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the kitchen looked like in the house?

DE VRIES: Oh, gee. Well, of course, you had wooden tables and wooden chairs and a stove. It was coal, we used to have coal. And there isn't much I can say because I was so much younger.

SIGRIST: What kind of food did people eat in France when you were growing up?

DE VRIES: Well, mostly it was always like a stew or something like that. Something that they cooked, you know. And they were all good cooks. It wasn't fancy but it was nourishing, you know. They'd get a soup bone or something with a lot of meat on it and something like that and, uh...

SIGRIST: Was there something that was prepared for special occasions that you remember?

DE VRIES: Well, they used to have French fries. They always had a pot, they had like suet. They'd melt the suet and use that for, to fry the potatoes. And they always bought a soup bone with a lot of meat on it and things like that. They made due with whatever they had.

SIGRIST: How many people were in your family when you lived in France?

DE VRIES: Well, my father, my mother, my sister and I. That was it.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

DE VRIES; Antoine.

SIGRIST: And can you tell a little bit about his background?

DE VRIES: Well he didn't know too much because he passed away before anything, you know. He was in the service. Of course, they all had to make the service over there and, like I say, I didn't, I don't remember him too much because he was in the service while I was a kid.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever talk about what she knew about your father's background?

DE VRIES: Well, they didn't get along. They were divorced, so that didn't help, I mean, as far as I was concerned, you know.

SIGRIST: So you didn't see him very much then? (Mr. De Vries coughs) What was your mother's name?

DE VRIES: Louise.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

DE VRIES: Van Capel.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

DE VRIES: V-A-N Capital C-A-P-E-L, I guess. Something like...

SIGRIST: Tell me about your mother's background. Where was she from?

DE VRIES: From Roubaix. We were all born there. She had three or four brothers and four or five sisters. And most of them came over here. They lived in Philadel-, well, they came to Holyoke first and then they, they spread out. But they all worked in the textile mills, like in Philadelphia, it was a big textile center, too.

SIGRIST: Did they do that in France also?

DE VRIES; Yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: What did your mother's parents do for a living?

DE VRIES: Well, my grandmother was a widow, too, she was a widow. She had eight children and at fifty-eight her husband died. So between the kids working, whatever she could do, they got, they got by, you know. And she came over here, too.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your grandmother in France?

DE VRIES: Vaguely, not too much, because I remember her well from over here.

SIGRIST: From over here, yeah.

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Just tell me a little bit about what your grandmother's personality was like.

DE VRIES: Well, she was kind of a rugged person. She had to be to bring up eight kids and no husband or anything. But they were all workers. They were neat, very much so.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's personality like?

DE VRIES: Well, she liked a good time, you know, I mean, because they used to get together, like, my grandmother went over here, she had like, it was a boarding house, it was where they made meals. She made dinners for whatever people that wanted to come, like the weavers. There were a lot of French and Belgians. And she used to, when we lived on Hamilton Street, that's where she had her place. And she used to make dinners and, just for the workers, and that's how she got by.

SIGRIST: Were here boarders all French people?

DE VRIES: French and Belgian, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, did your mother work in France?

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And she did...

DE VRIES: She was a weaver over there. Well, first she was a spinner and then as she got older, she went to weaving.

SIGRIST: Can you explain to me what a spinner does?

DE VRIES: Oh, well, it's a machine where they take the raw material, I guess, and make yarn out of it and they put that on bobbins and then the weavers get it, they put it in the shuttles to work the looms, you know.

SIGRIST: Was there a special kind of cloth that this town was well known for?

DE VRIES: Well, it all depends what they, what they were weaving. In wool, you had like clothing and then you had the Jacquards, which you wouldn't know what a Jacquard is, would you?

SIGRIST: I do, actually, but explain it for us on tape.

DE VRIES: Well, they have the pattern hanging from the ceiling and as the pattern weaves, the, the certain thread is dropped down and they make the pattern out of it.

SIGRIST: These are like pattern cards, correct?

DE VRIES: Yeah, they have a, it keeps going around (?). As a matter of fact, later on, I worked on a Jacquard here in Holyoke, on a, Skinner's. And then the wife, when we were getting married, I was still single then, she wanted to make a wedding dress. So I was working on a Jacquard. That was the only one there. And I talked to Joe Skinner, was it Joe Skinner? One of the Skinner boys, anyway, that owned the factory and I told him, you know, "I'd like to get some silk." He said, "When the time comes, just come over and tell me and we'll get you some." So he gave me enough and the wife and her mother made her wedding dress. And you know where that dress is today? In a museum here in Holyoke [Heritage State Park Visitor's Center] (he laughs) so that's, because I kept it, well the wife did too, but she passed away about twelve years ago, and before that the kids were growing up and they were all too big. They could never wear her dress. So after she passed away, I came across the dress and they had like Skinner's, they were having a reunion, like the people that, former workers there. So I went there and I looked things over and I said, "Gee, I got a dress." Oh, and they were so excited about it. They wanted to see it. I said, Well, the next time I come over I'll bring it." And then, sure enough,

about a week or so after, I went up with it and they got all excited about it. They really wanted it, you know, because that stuff was scarce. Everybody scattered away and nobody had any silk anymore. So they put it in a glass case over there and it sits right in the museum.

SIGRIST: That's a great honor.

DE VRIES: Yeah, well, rather than letting it hang around, the kids, the grandchildren, could never put, put it on because the wife was kind of tiny, too. She was only five/four and, she passed away twelve years ago and it's been lonely since then.

SIGRIST: Yeah, tell me a little bit more about your mother in France. What kinds of household chores did your mother do?

DE VRIES: Well, naturally, housework and a, one thing about the Belgians, they were all very neat, every one of them. You could eat off the floor, you know. And they were all wooden floors and they used to be swept down all the time. And, of course, my mother, working like that, once in a while we would go over to my grandmother's

and we would have our meals there. Of course, my
mother always gave a little bit to my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Was your mother born in France or Belgium?

DE VRIES: France.

SIGRIST: She was.

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were her parents Belgian?

DE VRIES: Belgian, yeah.

SIGRIST: They were Belgian. Were you responsible for any
household chores, you and your sister?

DE VRIES: No, I was too young then.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you any stories about when you
were born?

DE VRIES: I don't remember. I just took it for granted I was born

and that was it! (they laugh) See, they didn't...

SIGRIST: Is your sister older or younger?

DE VRIES: She was two years older.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

DE VRIES: Yvonne.

SIGRIST: And tell me perhaps a story that sticks out in your mind
about your interaction with your sister when
you were growing up in France.

DE VRIES: Well, my sister was always bigger than myself. I was
kind of puny kid all the time. And she kind of took
care of me, you know. Did you want to see a picture?
Of course, it won't go on there but I....(referring
to the audio tape recorder)

SIGRIST: When we're done I'll, sure, I'll look at a picture.
Well, did you get along well with your sister?

DE VRIES: Oh, yeah, but she was always protecting me. I was, I was

kind of puny. They always picked on me and she used to do the fighting for me. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did your sister go to work in the mills in France?

DE VRIES: Yes, she did. She did it the same way. She worked in the spinning room and then she went weaving with my mother.

SIGRIST: And that was before you came here?

DE VRIES: No, that was after.

SIGRIST: That was when you got here. Did she work at all in France or was she still too young?

DE VRIES: No, she was too young. She came over here with my grandmother about a couple of years before we did because she had, my uncles were over here with my grandmother and (he clears his throat), excuse me, some of the aunts, so...

SIGRIST: This is all your mother's family, right?

DE VRIES: Yeah, so...

SIGRIST: Did your mother keep in contact with your fa-,
probably didn't keep in contact with you father's
family at all,
correct?

DE VRIES: No.

SIGRIST: So you don't remember grandparents on that side, or
anything like that?

DE VRIES: No, I don't. I got, I got a picture when he was in the
service, that's about all.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun as a child in France? What, what
games did you play that you remember?

DE VRIES: (he laughs) Well, like I was saying, we used to float
our wooden shoes in the gutter if it rained, but that's
about all. As far as games are concerned, I don't
remember like playing in the school in recess, or
something, running around after one another, playing
tag, but that's it. There wasn't too much fun over
there. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: You mentioned you wore wooden shoes. What other kinds of clothing did you wear in France?

DE VRIES: Well, the clothing were always nice. They were very good and we were always dressed good when we were kids. In fact, I got, I think I've got a picture of my sister and I, a colored picture, and she is holding my hand. We were cute kids. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember, can you describe for me what the clothes looked like? Were they different somehow than here?

DE VRIES: No, no. They were normal, normal clothing, I mean like you know dresses for the girls, but they were always neat. But outside of that I can't say much.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your mother washed the clothes?

DE VRIES: Washed?

SIGRIST: Yes. Do you, do you remember how our mother washed clothes?

DE VRIES: Well I know, they did a lot of boiling, I know. And the scrub board, had no washing machines in those days.
(he laughs)

SIGRIST: And you didn't have to help, so...(he laughs)

DE VRIES: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the religion. What religion were you?

DE VRIES: Well, that's where the problem came in. They were all Catholic and at one time the Church got overpowering and it turned a lot of the people against the Church. Because I was baptized, and my daughter, (correcting himself) my grand-, I mean my daugh-, my sister...

SIGRIST: Sister.

DE VRIES: ...was baptized, but we never were church members because, like I say, they got too powerful and they were running the people too much, so they broke away from it. Not only my family but all the people around there that I knew.

SIGRIST: So your family really didn't go to church frequently,
that you remember?

DE VRIES: No, but I was baptized and my sister was baptized. In fact, when I was over there I saw the church where I was baptized and, uh, but coming over here was the same way. I never went to church because the folks didn't go, so I didn't go. And that was a problem sometimes.

SIGRIST: Was there, uh, in France, was there some way that you did practice the religion at home? For instance, did you say prayers at home or anything like that?

DE VRIES: No, I don't remember any of it.

SIGRIST: You mentioned Christmas before.

DE VRIES: Yeah, see.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how you celebrated Christmas?

DE VRIES: Well, over there Santa Claus came on a donkey and when a, you were supposed to, we had our wooden shoes and we put

carrots, a piece of lettuce or something for the, for
the donkey, you know, just to feed, feed the donkey.
But when I was a kid, I used to get better Christmas,
Christmas presents over in France than I did over
here. In fact, I remember one Christmas I got like an
opera house, you know like the stage and all the, all
the marionettes in there, but I never got anything over
here. The only thing I got over here when I was a kid
was when the Elks gave a party for the children or when
I belonged to the German Turn Hall, they had
Christmas, every Christmas they gave out fruit and
vegetables, not vegetables, nuts and stuff, but they
never celebrated too much.

SIGRIST: What was the name of that place, the German Turn...?

DE VRIES? Yeah, the German Turn Verein. Did you ever hear of it?

SIGRIST: Turn Verein? Can you spell that?

DE VRIES: Yeah. It's a, T-U-R-N, Turn Verein, V-E-R-I-E-N [sic:
Verein] And it was a gymnastics society and they had,
all over the world they had, they had them in Europe.
Of course, I didn't know that then. But over here

they had them all over the country and I belonged to
one, well it's still in existence, but they don't, they
don't have gymnastics anymore. They had one here,
right here in Springdale and one in South Holyoke,
but that's where I started to go, I mean, and it was
all German.

SIGRIST: And it was an organization for, for immigrants basically,
right? Germans or French...

DE VRIES: No, it was more, like I say, it was all German members
but they'd take any kid into, because I started
following some kids from school and I used to follow
them because that's, that's where they'd go, the Turn
Hall. So I go in there one time and the kids running
all over place and having a good time, so I went in
along with them. And when it came time to start the
classes, they had a bell on a, a guy pulled a bell for
the gong and they all got in line. I was just standing
there. And I remember the old Dutchman, Carl Schubach
[PH] his name was, and he was like a real
Prussian, you know, he had that big, long, white (he
gestures as though having a moustache) and he asked me,
"Whaz iz thaz?" (he laughs) I said, "I want to play with

my friends." "Well, get in line," he says and he gave me a card. He says, "Take this home," that's what I understood anyway," and have your parents sign it." And since that time I was a member up 'til a few years ago.

SIGRIST: I'm just curious. Of course, you are an American now, how did your mother feel about you going to a German organization?

DE VRIES: It didn't phase her at all. As long as I stayed out of trouble and had a good time.

SIGRIST: Let's go back to France for a second. You said that your grandmother was in America. She came here before you did, and that your mother's brothers were in America.

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were they all here in Holyoke?

DE VRIES: Yes.

SIGRIST: And they were all working in the textile mills.

DE VRIES: Right.

SIGRIST: Did you know anything about America (he clears his throat) when you were growing up as a child in France?

DE VRIES: No, not a thing.

SIGRIST: Did you have any image as to what America would be like?

DE VRIES: Nothing, no.

SIGRIST: Your mother wanted to join her family.

DE VRIES: That's right.

SIGRIST: Did you and your sister want to leave your home?

DE VRIES: Well, we didn't have no choice. We had to go where the parents (he laughs), parents were. (he laughs) But I, I, I didn't want to leave France. I'd rather stay overthere. Especially when I got over here. That's when I had troubles over here. We were here, we came in August. I think it was around the last week,

and school opened. So, my grandmother took me by the hand and walked me to school, which was only about a block away from where we lived. And she opened the door, the front door and pushed me in. And I'm just standing there like a dummy. Finally the teacher, one of the teachers came down and she starts talking to me, and, of course, I couldn't understand her. So the principal came down and took me by the hand, and out me in the first grade and that's when my trouble started. I didn't know a word of the language, like I say, and then there was a lot of kids who used to pick on me because I was a foreigner. No, that came after. But in the meantime, if you wanted to go to the bathroom you had to ask permission. So, I didn't know how to ask permission. So when I had to go, I would just stand up, go and come back and then I had to put my hand out and I get a licking. To me that was always so stupid. The teacher really enjoyed hitting the, the kids, I guess, and she picked on me because I, and in the meantime the kids saw how I was treated, so they started treating me the same way. And after school, there was always two or three kids picking on me. I had to fight the whole gang and I got so, I got sick of getting beat up, so I started running and I turned out to be a pretty good runner.

SIGRIST: (they laugh) Do you remember packing to leave for America?

DE VRIES: No. I remember the night before we left we went to my aunt's. She lived right in the same court there, to say goodbye and all

that, and that was it. And she gave me a spool of thread, it was like to fly a kite or something, and I brought that over here. But outside of that I don't remember anything.

SIGRIST: Was anyone else traveling with you and your sister and your mother?

DE VRIES: To come here, you mean?

SIGRIST: Yes.

DE VRIES: No.

SIGRIST: Did someone else come with you?

DE VRIES: No.

SIGRIST: Just the three of you?

DE VRIES: That's right. We went to Antwerp, which was close by, within...

SIGRIST: How did you get to Antwerp?

DE VRIES: (he laughs) We must have taken a train because it was too far to walk, I'm sure.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your mother did with the furniture and everything they had in your house?

DE VRIES: It was just left behind, I guess. Well, of course, we still had relatives over there. If there was anything that was any good, they'd take it, you know, but it wasn't like it is over here, all modern furniture or anything like that. There was washboards and wash tubs and stove and things like that.

SIGRIST: Did you stay overnight in Antwerp, or did you stay any amount of time before getting on the ship?

DE VRIES: Excuse me, there's the phone.

SIGRIST: We're just going to pause for a moment. (break in tape)
Mr. DeVries, we were talking about the family going to Antwerp...

DE VRIES: Antwerp.

SIGRIST: Do you know who paid for your passage on the ship?

DE VRIES: Well, it must have been the family because I know my mother didn't, wasn't too rich so they probably helped her and when she got over here she paid it off.

SIGRIST: Did your mother or you children carry any cash on you at all that you remember?

DE VRIES: No, no.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Antwerp?

DE VRIES: Just overnight.

SIGRIST: And then that's where you boarded the ship.

DE VRIES: Right.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

DE VRIES: The Statendam.

SIGRIST: And tell me, was this the first ship that you had ever

seen?

DE VRIES: Right.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw the ship?

DE VRIES: I didn't have a chance to think about anything. There was so much going on, you know. But I remember the day before we left, and they drink a lot of beer over there. And I was used to drinking beer also. So, my mother and a few other passengers went to a cafe and I told my mother I was thirsty, so she gave me two cents and she says, "Here buy yourself a glass of beer." So I went to the bar and I put the two cents on the bar and I don't know why but they were all snickering and laughing, so I asked for a glass of beer and got it! (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, we should say you were seven years old at this time.

DEVRIES: Yeah, at that time.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of examination in Antwerp before getting on the ship?

DE VRIES: No.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being on the ship? What sticks out in your mind about the voyage on the Atlantic?

DE VRIES: Well, it was a long voyage and after a few days, whenever we heard the gong to go for dinner or whatever, you'd see everybody running to the rail to heave, you know. I did that a few times, too. But coming over, of course, it was just my mother and I, we were like in the not, not in the steerage but in the touring class, that was second. And my mother, we used to have, whenever we had a meal, she would always take some food or whatever and we would go over to the steerage people, the kids were, and we'd give them some food, because they didn't have any food. Whatever they had, they had to bring it themselves. So my mother was always kindhearted and was always looking for somebody like that. But I remember one time, I had an egg and I put it in my coat pocket and I was going to give it to the kids and I sat on it! (he laughs)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Can you describe where you slept on the ship for me?

DE VRIES: Uh, well, it was just like two beds, I guess. Like a
cabin. It wasn't the steerage. It was, you had your
own cabin.

SIGRIST: You had your own room.

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there a separate dining room...

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...for you? Can you, do you remember anything about
that?

DE VRIES: Well, the dining room was for everybody, but that's where

we used to eat. And, like I say, we used to take some food away to give it to the steerage. But it was a long trip, thirteen days.

SIGRIST: Was there a storm?

DE VRIES: No, no. Just wavy. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did they supply and kind of entertainment for you on the ship? Was there anything to do while you were on the ship?

DE VRIES: No, I don't remember. There could have been, but I don't, if there was we never were involved. We used to be on deck all the time, walking around or my mother would be lying down like on the deck chairs and I would sit between her legs and fall asleep.

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier, before we started to record, that your family had actually booked passage, or wanted to book passage earlier that year. Can you explain that for me, please?

DE VRIES: Well, I don't know if it was, it was on the Titanic and I

don't know if they, it was overbooked or was tooexpensive, but one or the other reasons was why we did not get on there. We couldn't get passage, so it turned out all right anyway for us, for us. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Indeed! So, you said it was about thirteen days on the ship?

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Thirteen days. Do you remember coming into New York?

DE VRIES: That I'll never forget.

SIGRIST: Can you explain that for me, please?

DE VRIES: Well, when we reached the harbor of New York, everybody started going to the rail, you know. And I didn't know what they were doing. And they were all looking at the Statue of Liberty. Of course, I didn't, the Statue didn't mean anything to me. So they all crowded to the rail and, by doing that, I got pushed away from my mother. I just walked away. And I couldn't see anything anyway, so I went in, inside of the boat and there was

like a corridor and there was, like a cabinet there just below the porthole. So I got on the cabinet and I was looking out the porthole. And all of a sudden I heard a swish and I got a wallop on the back of the head. It was my mother. She was, she was hysterical. She thought I was off the ship, so she held onto me after that. So, when we got, we were disembarking, it was like a madhouse. Everybody wanted to get off, you know. And we ended up in Ellis Island. And we were there three days. In those days you had to have a sponsor, you know, to speak up for you when you got there. And our sponsor thought we were coming in three days later, so there was nobody there for us, so we went like in Alcatraz. It was like a, like a big jail. It was quite an experience. I will never forget that.

SIGRIST: Explain to me what sticks out in your mind the most about being detained there for three days.

DE VRIES: Well, there were so many things there that, uh, like at night, when, well, it was time to go to bed or before that, they'd lower the spring beds from the ceiling, you know. They would crank them up and down and they would bring them down. And the people that were there, there for a week or two before us, they knew the ropes. They knew what to expect, you know. Of course, we didn't. And, uh, they would bring that down and you had to fight for the blankets. You had to fight for the

sheets and the pillows. So it wasn't too long before my
mother got smartened up and (he laughs) she got her
share and then I remember eating and there was no
butter. And my mother put up a squawk. She said, "I
didn't come to America to eat dry bread," she says. So
we got butter. (he laughs) She was always a battler.
She was always looking for, for, you know, not to put
anything over on her, so...

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you on Ellis Island?

DE VRIES: What did we what?

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you?

DE VRIES: Oh, there's like a big dining area, like a big hall.

SIGRIST: And did you have to undergo any kind of medical
examinations at Ellis Island?

DE VRIES: No, I don't remember any. I remember being up at the top
floor there and looking out over the port and I
was crying all time I was there. I didn't want, I didn't
want to stay in this country. But, we were stuck. We

had to wait. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did your mother, later on, ever tell you how she was feeling at that time? You know, when you were an adult, did you ever talk about this with her?

DE VRIES: No, we never did. I mean, well, like I say, when my grandmother used to have that place where she made the meals, it was like a meetinghouse after hours, like in the evening or like on weekends. They'd all come over there to, having a beer, you know, to have a good time. Singing, a lot of singing. Someone had an accordion, he'd be playing that. So they kind of stuck together anyway, you know.

SIGRIST: But did your mother ever express to you later on how she was feeling through this whole process of, of coming across the Atlantic and being held at Ellis Island? What was going through her mind?

DE VRIES: She never mentioned it. I mean, we probably talked about it but I never remember any of that stuff. Because, I know they all had troubles, so that they just had a lot fun just talking about different things,

laughing about it and that was it. They talked about their work and their bosses, how they got along. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you were detained at Ellis Island, you were there for three days, do you remember any of the other people who were there specifically? Any other people being detained or other children perhaps?

DE VRIES: Well, we didn't get together too much. My mother always had me by the hand. She didn't want to lose me. (he coughs) But, like I say, I remember being up on the top floor like that and looking over and just crying and wanting to go back home, you know, back to France. But there was nothing I could do about it.

SIGRIST: Who finally came to meet you?

DE VRIES: My grandmother and the sponsor, so...

SIGRIST: Who was the sponsor?

DE VRIES: Oh, I don't know. Some, some friend of the family, I guess, so, they, they said they had made a mistake. They thought it was

three days after we landed, you know. And I remember when we got on a train, and going through the back of the blocks, you know, the big tenement blocks and all the clotheslines up so high and my mother used to say, "I wonder how they hand their clothes up there." (he laughs) Never figured about the pulleys, you know.

SIGRIST: Did you go, when your grandmother came to Ellis Island, did she take you right here to Holyoke by train...

DE VRIES: Right, yeah.

SIGRIST: ...or did you stay overnight in New York City...

DE VRIES: No.

SIGRIST: ... before coming up?

DE VRIES: We came, we came right, I said that they let us out, we got on a train and come over here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your mother greeted your grandmother?

DE VRIES: How she..?

SIGRIST: How she greeted your grandmother?

DE VRIES: Oh, they were happy to see one another, of course. But they talked Belgian. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what some of your first impressions were of America? What was some of the things that stuck out in your mind.

DE VRIES: My going to school! Like I say, I had my problems there.

SIGRIST: You explained a little about that before. Tell me how you learned English.

DE VRIES: The hard way. Like I say, there was no bilingual teachers in those days. You got hit in the back of the head if you didn't know what they were talking about. Then you learned that way. And within the first year, I knew how to get by. I knew how, I could understand the teacher and everything and, uh, I got to, to like school. I used to enjoy it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your first word was in English?

DE VRIES: First word? (he laughs) No, I don't. Would you remember?

SIGRIST: It depends what the word was.

DE VRIES: Yeah. (they laugh). It was probably a dirty word.

SIGRIST: So the kids kind of picked on you in class.

DE VRIES: All the time.

SIGRIST: Were you the only immigrant child in the class?

DE VRIES: At that time. Well, the only friends I had was another French couple that came here a couple of years before we did. And the boy was my, he was French, of course. And he was born two weeks after I was and we had practically the same birthday in Feb-, Jan-, February and we were close. We got to be real good friends. His name was Marcel Verheyn...

SIGRIST: Verheyn?

DE VRIES: Pardon?

SIGRIST: Verheyn?

DE VRIES: Verheyn.

SIGRIST: Verheyn.

DE VRIES: V-E-R-H-E-Y-N. And we stayed friendly for our, all the time we lived in Holyoke. Finally, he got married and moved out to near Pittsfield somewhere, over there.

And his father used to live down below here and they were always, they did a lot of pigeon racing, you know, in Europe.

SIGRIST: Pigeon racing?

DE VRIES: Right.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's...

DE VRIES: They used to train the pigeons so, to, to for prizes, you know. And he lived right here in Ingleside and he has a pigeon coop there and we used to go down there. And, of course, the folks had some here, too. My stepfather had

some, two pigeons here and I remember I used to take them and put them in a crate and then I would take a ride to Forest Park or someplace and leave them loose just to train them. But this Verheyn, he won the grand, grand prize. They, I think it was across the country. They were pretty, they had a clock and when they left, they had a, the birds had a special band on their leg so when the bird landed they took the band off and put it on the clock for the right time and sometimes the birds would come to the coop but they wouldn't go inside and they used to drive the, the trainers nuts! (he laughs)

SIGRIST: You said this is something that, that they had brought with them from France.

DE VRIES: That's right.

SIGRIST: This was something that was done frequently in France.

DE VRIES: That was a big, big thing out there, pigeon racing.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that, you mentioned your stepfather. (he

clears his throat) Did your mother remarry soon
after...

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...coming to America?

DE VRIES: Over here, yeah.

SIGRIST: How soon after she arrived?

DE VRIES: Oh, it was quite a long time. I would say maybe, I think
it was my early teens.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you had been here...

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...quite a, quite a while. (he clears his throat)
Excuse me. Tell me about your mother going to work.
How soon was it after she arrived that she got her job
at the mill?

DE VRIES: Well, I don't imagine it was too long before, you know,
she got a job. Because they, all those, they were all

the first job? You would never guess. That was for forty-four hours, three dollars and twenty cents.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

DE VRIES: Fourteen. As soon as I was fourteen they got me a job. And before, when I left, the teacher said you better go see the principal, so I went in to see him and he said, "Well, you're such a good scholar," he said, "you can skip the eight grade and go right into the ninth." So that was all right with me. I wanted, I liked school. I wanted to stay in school but my mother needed that extra few dollars, you know, so that was it. I didn't have a chance to, same way with my sister. She had to go through the same process before I did. She got a job.

SIGRIST: And explain for me specifically what that first job was. What did you actually have to do in the mill for that first job?

DE VRIES: Well, in weaving, they had to have the yarn on bobbins, you know. And they come in big blocks with the pins and the bobbins on every one. And my job was, well, the

boss would go around, pick out, he'd put down what you, what you needed. That type four or five different bobbins. The color was almost the same but you had to have the ticket on there. If the weaver brought the ticket and you gave them the same number. And that went on for a while, about a year, and then they were always looking for the big bobbins because they would last longer. The smaller bobbins, they changed faster, you know, more work for the weaver. So this, this, this weaver, I didn't see him do it, but he grabbed a board of bobbins and the color and everything was what he wanted but, uh, no, it was, it was just off a shade. That's what it was. And when they found out that he had the wrong filling, what they called the filling, the thread, he said I gave him, I gave it to him, and, uh, which wasn't true. He took it, but I got fired anyway. And that was the best thing that ever happened to me. (he laughs) So, I found another job. Oh, I had dozens of different jobs growing up. But I always liked reading. I always had a book. In fact, my mother used to call me "the little mister." I always had a book in my hands. I went to grammar school, evening grammar, and then I went to evening high for a couple of years and, like I say, I read a lot and different jobs turned up but

I did everything. Then I started to weave. But I didn't weave at Alpaca. I went weaving at Skinner's. It was a better place to work. It wasn't such a, such a crazy place. It was all silk. It was light work.

SIGRIST: You are saying Skinner's...

DE VRIES: Yes, Skinner's...

SIGRIST: ...Skinner's Mills.

DE VRIES: Silk, Skinner's Silk Mill.

SIGRIST: Uh huh. What about your sister? She had been, she, how old was she when she was put to work?

DE VRIES: My sister?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

DE VRIES: Well, she went through the mill like I did with my mother, see. Well, she wove right sitting there. They all were weavers.

SIGRIST: Did your mother attempt to learn English?

DE VRIES: No. She spoke some but with a dialect, you know. We
used to laugh at her. And "Never mind," she says. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Was she working mostly with French people?

DE VRIES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And did you speak French in the house?

DE VRIES: Well, they, amongst themselves, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me where you lived when you first came up to
Holyoke.

DE VRIES: On Hamilton Street in, in Holyoke, in an apartment there.
In fact, they tore the building down not too long ago.

SIGRIST: Can you, can you walk me through that apartment, what
it, what it looked like?

DE VRIES: Well, you walked in the main entrance, like a block about
four, five stories high and every apartment on

both sides, you know. Well, it was on the first floor so that's where we lived there and then my mother got a place of her own on Birch Street, a small apartment. That's where we lived there.

SIGRIST: Were you living with other people in, on Hamilton Street?

DE VRIES: No, no.

SIGRIST: No. How many rooms did you have?

DE VRIES: Well, offhand, now I don't know if we stayed there or not before my mother got an apartment on Birch Street. It could be one way or the other because I don't remember. I know I spent a lot of time on Hamilton Street but I don't remember ever sleeping there.

SIGRIST: Is that where your grandmother lived?

DE VRIES: Yes.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. Was this, this was where your grandmother was. Were there any things that you saw in Holyoke that you had never seen before in France? Things that were new to you.

DE VRIES: Oh, the high blocks and the telephone, not the telephone
but outside but the clothesline poles and things like that,
of that, no.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in your first apartment?

DE VRIES: Electricity?

SIGRIST: Yes. Did you have electricity?

DE VRIES: No, it was gas.

SIGRIST: How did the gas work?

DE VRIES: We had, they had like mantles that they put on a jet,
turn the gas on, light it and that mantle would burn
and we would get, it would brighten the light and they
had like a globe to put over it, so mostly gas.

SIGRIST: Was this a, was this a safe way to light the house?

DE VRIES: Well, in each room you'd have to have, they'd bring the
light, the lamp in with you if you really needed

something.
dangerous.

And there was gas stove. It was pretty

SIGRIST: Do you remember any instance where the gas caught something on fire or...?

DE VRIES: Well, I remember that because I was a fireman after.
(they laugh) One of my jobs.

SIGRIST: Was your family affected by World War One at all?

DE VRIES: (misunderstanding) Well, one was in the flats. We were in ward two.

SIGRIST: No. Was your family affected somehow by World War One?

DE VRIES: Oh, the war! I thought it was "ward."

SIGRIST: World War One, yeah.

DE VRIES: Well, I know there was a lot of work. That's about all I can say.

SIGRIST: Did your uncles, were they of age to have to serve for

the U.S.?

DE VRIES: Yeah, my uncle Louis. He was taking a ride back to France for a trip, you know, and while he was on board ship war was declared. So they grabbed him as soon as it landed and they put him in the army and he went through the whole war. In fact, he is buried in Belgium now, in Brugge, so...

SIGRIST: What about here in the States, how was life in America affected by the war in Europe?

DE VRIES: Oh, there was lot of hysteria, I mean, people were doing everything they can to, you know, saving different things, and doing without, stuff like that and buying bonds if they could afford it.

SIGRIST: Was the textile industry affected at all by the war?

DE VRIES: No, not that I know of. I mean, they had woolen mills that were working full blast, but there was a lot of work. And they'd make drives to pick up the different metals, you know, like kettles and different things.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about World War One? Of course, you would have been in the middle of it...

DE VRIES: Yeah, sure. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: ... had you been back in France, you know. How, how did she feel about...

DE VRIES: Well, I guess they were never in favor of it, for sure.

As a matter of fact, she was so against the army and everything because when I was over here, when I became of age you, according to the French, if you were born in France from French parents, you were French. There was no getting away from it and you had to do your service. So when I was about eighteen, I got my papers from France to go to France to put in my service and my mother wouldn't, wouldn't let me do it. And I wanted to go. It was more like a, well, an adventure. It was for one year. They'd pay your way back and forth, you know. But I wanted to go and she didn't want it. She was so set against the army, so, the military she didn't like. (he laughs, he coughs)

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever wish that she had stayed in France?

DE VRIES: No, no, because the life was lot easier. As hard as they worked here, life was easier than over there. Well, one thing, there was never no welfare. They were too proud to try to get it anyway. They really worked. If they couldn't afford something, you went without. That was it.

SIGRIST: Did your mother belong to any kind of French organizations here in Holyoke?

DE VRIES: No.

SIGRIST: Did such things exist?

DE VRIES: Yeah. Well, there was a French Canadian, not, French Belgian club on Canal Street and all the, a lot our friends belonged there. So when there was a dance, a dance, or get- or part-, a picnic or something then we would go there. But outside of that, she never belonged to anything.

SIGRIST: As you began to grow up, did you tend to be friends with other French people or did you...?

DE VRIES: Well, there weren't too many of my age, like I said, that one fellow that was my age, but I like I say I started with the German society and my best friends were German up 'til, in fact, we went to gymnastic meeting in Louisville, Kentucky in 1926 and they had these German societies all over the country and they had a big tournament, a contest, that they call it a "Turnfest," at Louisville, Kentucky. That was at the, what the heck is the name of that tra-, uh, the racetrack there, Churchill Downs. That's where it was held. And I met some people there from Wisconsin. They were all German and their teacher was a fellow from Holyoke and I used to chum around with his brother. So we, and then we were in the same hotel in Louisville and I got to, to get all acquainted with them. And then I went, I went to Sheboygan a couple of times, you know, at different times of the year and I got to know a lot. I was a member out there, too. In fact, in 1930 I went there from California and I got a job working as a tree surgeon for the city and I belonged to the Turner's there and they went to Buffalo and they wanted me to go along but I was only, I only had that job for about one to two, you know. I says, "Gee, I can't leave, I just got the job." So I didn't go,

but since that time I corresponded with them, oh, up until now.

SIGRIST: So that organization was very important in your development here in America.

DE VRIES: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah. I, I have a question about the mills here in Holyoke. Were the mill workers unionized?

DE VRIES: Well, we had trouble with the union when I worked in Skinner's. They were all against the union and we went on strike on account of it but they broke the union anyway.

SIGRIST: So when you worked for Skinner's, were you a union member or you were not a union member?

DE VRIES: Oh, we were, we, we paid dues, that's all I remember. We must have been a mem-, member but, uh....

SIGRIST: What about your mother, was she ever a member of the union?

DE VRIES: Well, she was a strong union member. I mean she was always for the union and, of course, all the manufacturers over here are all against it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember big meetings about this sort of thing between the workers and management?

DE VRIES: Well, at my age I wasn't too interested. I didn't pay too much attention. But there was a lot of meetings, like the Alpaca and Skinner's, they are big textile mills. But, it was a struggle. They had to fight for everything. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Yeah. Well, we have just a couple of minutes left and I want to ask you what the name of your wife was?

DE VRIES: What the what...?

SIGRIST: What was you wife's name?

DE VRIES: Oh, Martha.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

DE VRIES: Martha Senecal.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Senecal?

DE VRIES: S-E-N-E-C-A-L.

SIGRIST: And when did you get married?

DE VRIES: At the church up on the, what the heck church is
that? It wasn't, it wasn't right in the church, it was
a, what the heck do you call that thing? Anyway, I
married, I got married. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: And do you remember what date, what year and date did you
get married?

DE VRIES: 1938. I don't know if it was Columbus Day. I think it
was Columbus Day, 1938.

SIGRIST: And how many children did you have and what were their
names?

DE VRIES: Two. A boy...

SIGRIST: And their names?

DE VRIES: Her, the name was Suzanne, the daughter. And the boy
is Douglas.

SIGRIST: Suzanne is older than Douglas? Yeah?

DE VRIES: Yeah, no, Douglas was older.

SIGRIST: Douglas is older than she is.

DE VRIES: Yeah. He was born in '40 and Suzanne was born
in '43.

SIGRIST: And, tell me, just quickly, did they have children? Do
you have grandchildren? How many grandchildren do you
have?

DE VRIES: You mean about the children?

SIGRIST: Yes, your children's children. How many grandchildren do
you have?

DE VRIES: Well, I got six. They're right there. (he gestures to a

photograph)

SIGRIST: Six, six grandchildren. Oh, yes. We see the photos over here. Let me just ask you very quickly, you said you have been back to France a couple of times, right?

DE VRIES: Yes.

SIGRIST: The first time you went back to France, what year was it?

DE VRIES: Well, the first time, of course, I've been back with the wife both times, but the first time, when we got to Roubaix where I was born, everything looked familiar to me. I remember the courts and the, of course, houses didn't change and it was quite a thrill. I remembered a lot of the things that I had, I saw before.

SIGRIST: So you felt a connection to what you were actually seeing.

DE VRIES: Oh, yes, yeah, and in Northern France, the French have a certain dialect. They call it "patois" and when you hear it, it reminded me so much of the folks at home

that they used to speak it that way here, you know. It wasn't a pure French. It was "patois." And the first time I heard it in Roubaix, there was an accident with the buses in like a big, uh, where the buses, you know, like a terminal and I could hear these bus drivers talking Roub-, uh, in French, only it was "patois" and I just stood there and listened to them because I thought so much of the folks back here.

SIGRIST: Do you know how to spell patois?

DE VRIES: Some what?

SIGRIST: Do you know how to spell patois?

DE VRIES: Patois? P-A-T-O-I-S.

SIGRIST: In our last couple of minutes, can you speak a little French for us on tape? (Mr. De Vries laughs) Just say who you are and "house" in French?

DE VRIES: I just don't know what to say because I have problems with it too, but I understand everything, but, uh, well, I'll say about the kids--"les enfants c'est tres

gentile est le filles est les belles filles and les garcons c'est les beaux garcon." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, thank you. Mr. De Vries, I want to thank you very much for letting me come out and asking you these questions about growing up in France and coming to this country. It is a real treat. We just don't find people who came from France. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Desire De Vries on November 11th, Friday, 1994 here in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Thank you very much.

DE VRIES: You're welcome.