

EI-627

JACOB WIERSMA

BIRTHDATE: APRIL 25, 1906

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 3, 1995

RUNNING TIME: 31:50

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: WHITINSVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 11/1995

TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

THE NETHERLANDS, 1922

AGE 17 (AS RECORDED IN THE INTERVIEW)

PASSAGE ON "THE ORDUNA"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Wiersma is the brother of Edith Oosterman, Interview EI-629. He refers to her as "Edie" throughout the interview. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 11/7/1995.

LEVINE: Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm here today, July 3rd, 1995. And I'm in Whitinsville. Am I pronouncing that...

WIERSMA: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Whitinsville, Massachusetts.

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And it's a beautiful day, and I'm here with Jacob Wiersma.

WIERSMA: That's right.

LEVINE: Wiersma. Who came from the Netherlands in 1922 in October when he was seventeen years old. And I'm looking forward to hearing everything you can remember. So let's start at the beginning. If you'd say your birthdate from the, for the tape. Your birthdate again for the tape.

WIERSMA: Oh. April 25th, 1906.

LEVINE: Okay. And where were you born? What town?

WIERSMA: Raard Dokkum.

LEVINE: Could you spell that, please?

WIERSMA: R-A-A-R-D, and D-O-K-K-U-M.

LEVINE: And did you live in the same town from the time you were born up until the time when you left...

WIERSMA: No.

LEVINE: Where did you go?

WIERSMA: Yeah. Yeah, that's right. We went back there, yeah.

LEVINE: You did?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you, you like, left, and then you came back...

WIERSMA: Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: ...to the same town?

WIERSMA: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: How old were you when you left there, do you remember roughly?

WIERSMA: Well...

LEVINE: When you first left Raard Dokkum, whatever it is.  
(she laughs)

WIERSMA: Oh. Oh. Well, see, that's Raard bei Dokkum.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WIERSMA: Okay, see, that's the same place. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, tell me what you remember about it.

WIERSMA: Well, I was, let's see, two, oh, I think I was seven years old when we moved.

LEVINE: Do you remember, do you have any memories of before you moved, when you were a little boy...

WIERSMA: Yeah, on the farm. My dad worked for my grandmother.

LEVINE: It was your grandmother's farm?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what kind of farm? What...

WIERSMA: Dairy farm.

LEVINE: A dairy farm.

WIERSMA: Yeah. See, my father worked as a, well, as a herdsman, you know. And my mother was a daughter, and he married the daughter of the father.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So was your grandfather not alive?

WIERSMA: Yeah. He died, well I was, I think I was two years old when he died.

LEVINE: So you, you have memories of your grandmother?

WIERSMA: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: What was her name?

WIERSMA: Edith.

LEVINE: And, and what do you remember about her, do you remember?

WIERSMA: Well, she was a big, big lady, that's all I know. But she was a real farmer.

LEVINE: She took care of the, of the cows as well.

WIERSMA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I can still see her in the barn taking care of the cows when they calved. She took care of the calves and stuff, just like, just like a nurse. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. You know, I should take, if you would put that down, because the microphone's so sensitive it's going to pick up all the rustling. Sorry. Anyway, so, so did you ever help her on the farm?

WIERSMA: No. I was too young yet.

LEVINE: You were too little. Uh-huh. And, and how about your father? What was his name?

WIERSMA: Louis.

LEVINE: And did your mother have other brothers and sisters who were also there?

WIERSMA: Yeah. Yeah. She had one brother and three sisters. Two sisters.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

WIERSMA: Sadie.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

WIERSMA: Wyga. W-Y-G-A.

LEVINE: So, when you were, up until the age you were seven and you were on the farm, did you go to school at all?

WIERSMA: I went to school, I was just in the fourth grade in the last school. I was ten years old.

LEVINE: And when you were on the farm up until the time you were seven...

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: ...had you started school by then?

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah. I started school. I was just in the fourth grade.

LEVINE: What do you remember about school?

WIERSMA: Well, we still had the old slates, the pencil and the little box with a sponge in it. All they do was wipe it off as the teachers checked it, you know. That's all there was to it. We were just going to start with pencil. We were big shots. (he laughs) And then I left school when I was ten. Then I went back to work for my uncle on the farm where my grandmother was.

LEVINE: Oh. So...

WIERSMA: So...

LEVINE: ...in other words, you, you left at, you left the farm at age seven and then you went back again when you were around ten?

WIERSMA: Well, then we, we moved. We had a little town, my dad had a little farm of his own. And we moved back to the city again later on.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What city was that?

WIERSMA: Dokkum. So we moved back there, and my dad worked in a cement factory making bricks. Then I went to school

down there, and then I went to, back to the farm when I was ten years old. I worked for my suit of clothes and board the first year.

LEVINE: You worked on the dairy farm?

WIERSMA: Yeah. My uncle's.

LEVINE: Wow.

WIERSMA: The second year I got two dollars a week and my board.  
(he laughs)

LEVINE: And what, and what were your duties? What did you do on, on the farm?

WIERSMA: Oh, milk cows and stuff. Oh, yeah. Everything. Get up four o'clock in the morning. Go home one afternoon every four weeks.

LEVINE: So, oh, you lived there then?

WIERSMA: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Stayed right there.

LEVINE: Was it like a, I mean, were there a lot of, were there

a lot of people working there, or was it...

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah. Four or five guys. Oh, yeah. Big farm.  
About twenty, about, cows I guess we had down there.  
Yeah.

LEVINE: Were you the youngest?

WIERSMA: No, I was the oldest in my family.

LEVINE: No, I mean, the workers?

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. All the farmers, they hired  
kids, you know. Yeah.

LEVINE: Is, did you expect at that point that that's what you  
would do...

WIERSMA: Well...

LEVINE: ...that you would go into farming and you would be...

WIERSMA: Hey, when you're young you don't know. You just take  
what you can get. I worked on a farm, then I worked  
in the, in the hotel. A guy had five cows and we used

to take care of that. We'd go out in the fields and milk the cows, and, you ever seen those things they have on the shoulders with two pails hanging?

LEVINE: Yeah.

WIERSMA: We'd walk back to the station again. People would come down with their little calves and put out the milk right off. It didn't go in the frigidaire or nothing. They didn't even strain it. Just as it came from the cow and that's it. (he laughs)

LEVINE: And how about the rest of your food? How, how did, did, were there markets? Did you, were there like weekly markets, or markets in town every so often?

WIERSMA: Oh, we, I never went to a market.

LEVINE: Where did you, where did the food come from?

WIERSMA: Oh, it was on the farm.

LEVINE: Oh, the farm also was...

WIERSMA: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You had potatoes and your

pigs. You used to kill a couple of pigs to have hanging right in the chimney there, smoked. It just, bacon and all that, you know. So they always smoked their own pigs, yeah.

LEVINE: How about other vegetables and...

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah. We had a garden.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So you really...

WIERSMA: But the main crop down there is potatoes. They eat more potatoes down there than anything else.

LEVINE: Do you remember any particular dishes that your mother or grandmother made that, that, that you remember from your childhood?

WIERSMA: The best dish we ever had was buttermilk. They, and the wagon used to come around with buttermilk. They cooked that slow in barley. And the wagon used to come in front of our house. Twenty-five cents for four quarts. Put it right on the table and we would have it for dinner. Good old soup and rye. (he laughs)

LEVINE: And do you, do you remember what, were you a religious family?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what did that involve? I mean, do you remember any either...

WIERSMA: Well, yeah...

LEVINE: ...religious occasions...

WIERSMA: Catechism. All the kids went to catechism and stuff. Yeah. And we had a Christian school.

LEVINE: And do you remember celebrating any particular religious...

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah. Queen's birthday.

LEVINE: What?

WIERSMA: The Queen's birthday.

LEVINE: Oh, really.

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Now, what, what would happen on that day?

WIERSMA: Well, almost like Fourth of July down here. We had concerts and stuff.

LEVINE: Do, do you remember any other occasions, like, that were for fun, or for, for, that were happy occasions?

WIERSMA: Happy occasions, it was in the wintertime. I went, we had two weeks off for school, and we'd go skating. Everybody go skating down there. They have all little tents on the ice where they sell chocolate and coffee and cake and whatever. That's the best time of the year.

LEVINE: Was Christmas a big time of celebration in your town?

WIERSMA: Not too much. No. I remember I used to get a, a little red hanky and a piece of cake, and that's, hey, we were happy.

LEVINE: How about games? Do you remember any games you played, like...

WIERSMA: They play, well, they call it catch. They get a little ball, it's just like a golf ball. And they hit it with their hand. That's a big game down there.

LEVINE: It's...

WIERSMA: But otherwise we would play with marbles. You know. Throw them against the wall, and then, your two of yours, and then clap and they would be yours.

LEVINE: Oh.

WIERSMA: Or have a line there and throw them right before the line.

LEVINE: What was the name of the, of the game you said with the little ball? What did you call that?

WIERSMA: Catch.

LEVINE: Oh, catch.

WIERSMA: Yeah. (unintelligible) Just like playing baseball down here.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about other winter sports, like...

WIERSMA: Skating and horse racing on the ice.

LEVINE: Oh.

WIERSMA: Horses. Boy, that really was nice.

LEVINE: Now would you watch that or you'd actually be in it?

WIERSMA: Watch it. I was too young to have a horse and sleigh.  
(he laughs)

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. Is there anything else you can...

WIERSMA: There's, there's, we used to get a bunch of people to, five, six couples, and they'd have a long pole on that side. (he indicates) Everybody one side, and this gate. All you could see is one line. And they go from, from Dokkum, eleven states they go through.

LEVINE: How long would it take?

WIERSMA: I forget how long would it take? But then they stop, and you have your hotels there. They have a board, a platform going from the ice up to the sidewalk, that they can go in the hotel. That's it. And they go again to the other state.

LEVINE: So these would be adults and children, or just...

WIERSMA: They're mostly adults. Yeah. A real hobby, you know?

LEVINE: Well, is, is there a name for that? Do they call that something?

WIERSMA: No. Just eleven states. That's all they really go to.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you can think of when you think back of the time until you were seventeen and when you...

WIERSMA: Well, I could think of a lot of, a lot of crazy things we did.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Why don't you say those. (she laughs)

WIERSMA: See, down there you have all little canals, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WIERSMA: So we used to jump them, jump them. And I remember the day when Edie fell in. We made a little fire, tried to get our shoes, and, see, you have wooden shoes. And we come home at night, the first thing my mother did was, we'd take our wooden shoes off, she'd feel our stockings, to see if they are wet. So if we did, we usually put some straw in there and they'd dry up a little bit, but if they were wet, boy, we'd get it. Yeah, wooden shoes were all we had. That's how I got hit. Fighting. Wooden shoe go and hit me in the nose. That's why my nose is crooked. But we used the wooden shoes for everything. You used it for tills. In the wintertime we could sit on one and have a leg over the other one and use it for a sleigh. And if you go out for a walk, you go and find a nice spring, we'd use it for a drinking cup. (they laugh)

There's a lot of things you can do with a wooden shoe. But those are the good times we had. We were always jumping ditches. Make fires and sat on the road. We were always in trouble.

LEVINE: Did you, did you pal around with a certain group of...

WIERSMA: No, but we had to walk, and always going to school. So we got, our school was over there, and the public school was over here. Well, we used to, we had to go by the public school. We'd meet a bunch of kids, and we, fights and stuff, you know. I got along all right.

LEVINE: Did you, did you here much about America before you actually knew you were coming here?

WIERSMA: I never heard anything about America, till we were on the boat. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Do you know how it was that it was decided that the family would come to this country?

WIERSMA: Yeah, I remember Dad talking to my mother's cousin there. The one that was to come with him. So that's it. When we came we didn't know what's going to happen. So all right. Down there you work on a farm, you come back here, and well, you get a job on a farm again. We landed on a Saturday I think. Monday I had

a job on a farm.

LEVINE: Well, let's, just before, can you remember getting ready to leave, the family getting ready to leave?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: What did, did your mother pack certain things that you remember?

WIERSMA: We had everything packed. Even that, even the (unintelligible) she was packed.

LEVINE: The, that came with you on the...

WIERSMA: Yeah, we had all the cases. But when we left New York, we took the Colonial boat going to Providence, and three o'clock in the morning the boat burned up.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

WIERSMA: So they threw all our stuff overboard.

LEVINE: Oh. Well, well, let's, let's just, before, talking about before when you were getting ready to leave. Do

you remember anything about that, the preparation to leave, or actually leaving?

WIERSMA: Not too much. Not too, because I was working on the farm and I wasn't home. So I didn't come till the morning, till the morning we left.

LEVINE: But you knew you were leaving?

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. And do you remember your mother and father, what they said about it?

WIERSMA: Not too much.

LEVINE: So, okay, so now, who were you travelling with on the ship?

WIERSMA: Oh, my mother's cousin.

LEVINE: And how many people?

WIERSMA: There were five. Three, three kids and father and mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your family was...

WIERSMA: Seven.

LEVINE: Seven children and your mother and father?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did your grandmother come?

WIERSMA: No. No.

LEVINE: Do you, do you remember saying good-bye to her?

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah. They were all waiting at the station.  
Yeah.

LEVINE: What did you do, take a train?

WIERSMA: Yeah. We had a, they had a horse train that time. We

had a train all by ourself.

LEVINE: You mean it was run by horses.

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So, and you were the only people on it?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: So what, what would it be like? Would it be like  
carriages?

WIERSMA: Yeah. Just a little regular train, that pull with  
horse. Yeah.

LEVINE: So that means there were no tracks, or there were  
tracks?

WIERSMA: Oh, yeah. You got the tracks. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: But you, you and your family were the only ones on it?

WIERSMA: Yeah. They gave us special. Yeah.

LEVINE: So you took the train from where?

WIERSMA: Dokkum.

LEVINE: And to, where did it take you to?

WIERSMA: Leeuwarden.

LEVINE: And was that the, where you were leaving from?

WIERSMA: Leeuwarden, no. Take the train to Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Oh, you left from Amsterdam.

WIERSMA: Amsterdam. Then to Germany. Then into France. We stayed in Paris.

LEVINE: Oh.

WIERSMA: And, see, we were there a whole week.

LEVINE: I see. How long did it take from the time you left The Netherlands till, till you arrived in Cherbourg?

WIERSMA: I forget now. Maybe a whole day, I think. Because I

know we were on a train the whole night.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the train ride?

WIERSMA: No, not too much.

LEVINE: And, and, and how about Cherbourg?

WIERSMA: Cherbourg was nice. Yeah. The hotel was, go up a great, steep hill where our soldiers stayed there during the war. Right on top, you could look right down on to the city. That was real nice. Yeah.

LEVINE: And then, and then did you board the ship the next day.

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. And that ship was the...

WIERSMA: Orduna.

LEVINE: The Orduna. And, and, what about the passage? How was that for you and for your family?

WIERSMA: It was good.

LEVINE: Nothing of...

WIERSMA: No. Nice, big boat, and we had a good time on it.

LEVINE: Yeah? What did you do?

WIERSMA: Run around the boat.

LEVINE: Had you ever been on a boat?

WIERSMA: No. That was the first time.

LEVINE: So, then the boat was coming into the New York Harbor.  
Do you remember that part?

WIERSMA: Yeah. It was all the excitement. See all the big  
buildings.

LEVINE: And do you remember when you came what you saw and how  
you felt?

WIERSMA: Like I say, we watched the Statue of Liberty through  
the peek hole.

LEVINE: Did you know what that was? Did, were you...

WIERSMA: Well, the people was telling us, the people on the boat, you know, to watch out for that.

LEVINE: And how about Ellis Island? What...

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: What are your impressions of that...

WIERSMA: Yeah, that was something we didn't know nothing about. Of course it was good.

LEVINE: Did you, did you, do you remember the building? Can you describe anything about it, or the accommodations you had or...

WIERSMA: No. No, I, changed too much.

LEVINE: Then what happened? Did somebody meet you, or what happened after Ellis Island?

WIERSMA: From Ellis Island I went to Hoboken. (unintelligible)

Hoboken. We stayed there I don't know how long.

LEVINE: Do you remember why you were staying there?

WIERSMA: Yeah. I'll let Edie take care of that.

LEVINE: And...

WIERSMA: I, I told you enough of it. (they laugh)

LEVINE: You've said enough? All right, well just, quickly then. What, when you came, when you got into this country, and you were, you were now here, do you remember some things that struck you as new and different?

WIERSMA: Well, yeah. Because all these stone walls, roads and stone walls, you know. Instead of, we had all little canals, and there's all stone walls down here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Anything else that was new and different that you...

WIERSMA: No. Of course, down there all the homes are brick, and down here it's all wood.

LEVINE: And you mentioned you got a job right away.

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Tell about that, how you happened to get it, and what it was.

WIERSMA: Well, I, I landed on a pig farm. I was there, Saturday I landed there. It was Sunday, Monday, Tuesday night, a guy says, "You want a job on the farm?" I says, "Yeah." So he says, "Okay." He took me to a farmer, and I was hired. Seventeen dollars a week and board.

LEVINE: That, that seemed like a lot probably...

WIERSMA: For, instead of two dollars a week and board? (he laughs)

LEVINE: So, where was the farm? The pig farm?

WIERSMA: Williams Hill.

LEVINE: Mass.?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, now, what about your father? Where was he...

WIERSMA: He worked in a brass foundry over here. (he indicates)

LEVINE: Oh. How was it that you happened to come to Massachusetts? Do you know?

WIERSMA: Yeah, Mother's cousin. He came from here. Yeah.

LEVINE: So did your, how did your mother and father like it after they were here a little while? Did...

WIERSMA: All right. Yeah. They went back for a trip. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did they have any regrets about coming here, about immigrating?

WIERSMA: No. No.

LEVINE: Is there anything else about life in the new country

that...

WIERSMA: Well, you got to learn the language first, you know.

LEVINE: How did you learn it? Do...

WIERSMA: Just pick it up. And the folks pick it up with the kids. Kids come home out of school and they say this, say that, and my mother picked it up, my dad picked it up.

LEVINE: Now did, did you or your father become a citizen at some point?

WIERSMA: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you do that on your own, or you became a citizen under your father's...

WIERSMA: No, I had to go on my own. I was old enough. Yeah.

LEVINE: And, and what was that like? Do you remember what you had to do?

WIERSMA: Yeah. The judge just asked us different questions,

and stuff. He says to my mother, "How many kids you got?" She says, "Eight." He says, "Give her the papers." He says, "Give her the papers."

LEVINE: So, so what, you started out on the farm, then. And then did you stay doing that for a long time...

WIERSMA: No.

LEVINE: ...or what did you do then?

WIERSMA: I quit the farm, and I went into a baker's shop. I quit the baker's shop and went selling radios. I quit that and I went to New York state on the farm. And I come back here, I start a farm on my own.

LEVINE: What kind of farm did you...

WIERSMA: Dairy farm. I quit that and started working in the shop again. I quit the shop and started painting paper (unintelligible). And I retired from that twenty-five years ago. (he laughs)

LEVINE: And did you ever marry?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what, how did you meet your wife?

WIERSMA: Oh, just going to church and a lot of young people.

LEVINE: And do you have children?

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. What, what's your wife's name and your children's names?

WIERSMA: Nellie Le Fleur.

LEVINE: So she, did she immigrate to this country, too, or was she born here?

WIERSMA: No, she was born here.

LEVINE: And your children's names?

WIERSMA: Oh, I got two girls and four boys.

LEVINE: So, you have grandchildren as well?

WIERSMA: Twenty-eight, twenty grandchildren, sixteen girls out of twenty, and twenty-eight great.

LEVINE: Wow. And how is this time in your life?

WIERSMA: Good.

LEVINE: Yeah?

WIERSMA: I love it, every bit of it.

LEVINE: Do you think, can you think of any, I mean, how do you think about the Dutch side of you? I mean, do you feel like you're, part of you is Dutch, part of you is American? I mean, how do you...

WIERSMA: Oh, part of me is the Dutchman. They always say cheap Dutchman, you know. So what? (they laugh)

LEVINE: Why are you proud of it?

WIERSMA: Because, a lot of good Dutchmans [sic], you know.

LEVINE: Anything else you can think of that, maybe, attitudes

or ways of doing things, or, that, that you've, that you've carried over from your, your beginnings...

WIERSMA: Oh, my memory's getting shot, you know.

LEVINE: How about your mother and father? Did they continue doing a lot of the ways, things, the ways that they did them in The Netherlands after they came here?

WIERSMA: Yeah, a lot of, did the same old Dutch cooking, which was good. I still miss it.

LEVINE: What, what do you miss most about it?

WIERSMA: Well, you take, my mother used to, I can still see her. Saturdays, they cooked the, so she'd have the stuff ready for Sundays. They didn't cook on Sunday. I can still see a lot of pot roast on the stove and stuff, and everything ready for Sunday.

LEVINE: Any other ways about them that they kept up?

WIERSMA: Oh, as you go along, you go along with the country, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah. So, have you visited? Have you gone back at all?

WIERSMA: Yeah, I went back three years ago.

LEVINE: Oh.

WIERSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how did it strike you?

WIERSMA: I loved it. It was really nice. A lot of changes. Boy, these roads, hundred miles an hour, ride straight, oh, perfect. And that was fun. Then my sister and my daughters, I says, "Funny, these cars. Now the cars are dent up like (unintelligible)." But I found out later, if you smash the car down there and not fix it in a week's time, they take it away from you. That's why there's no cars with dented fenders and stuff. Because I was surprised going that fast, you know. He says in a week's time you got to have it fixed, or they take it off the road.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else that you would like to say about coming to this country or your life since

you've been in this country before we close?

WIERSMA: No. I think I said about everything I could. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Well, that was great. Well, thank you very much.

WIERSMA: You're welcome.

LEVINE: And I've been speaking with Jacob Wiersma. And he came from The Netherlands in 1922 when you were seventeen years old. And how old are you today?

WIERSMA: Eighty-nine.

LEVINE: Eighty-nine.

WIERSMA: Lot of blessings in those years.

LEVINE: Well, you look healthy also.

WIERSMA: I feel healthy. I bowl three days a week for exercise. That's the only exercise I get.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I want to thank you very much. And it's

July 3rd, 1995, and this is Janet Levine, and I'm signing off.