

EI-629

EDITH OOSTERMAN

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LEVINE: Today is July 3rd, 1995, and I'm here in Whitinsville at the home of Edith Oosterman, who has been gracious enough to lend her home so that I've done two other interviews here, just prior to this with Hilda Dykstra and Mrs. Oosterman's brother, Jacob Weirsma. So now I'm going to talk with Edith Oosterman, who came from the Netherlands in 1922 when she was twelve years old, and I thank you very much for seeing me and inviting the others in.

OOSTERMAN: You're welcome.

LEVINE: Let's star at the beginning. If you've give your birth date for the tape.

OOSTERMAN: November 10, 1909.

LEVINE: And where in the Netherlands were you born?

OOSTERMAN: Raard, R-A-A-R-D.

LEVINE: And did you live there until you left for the United States?

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OOSTERMAN: No, from there we moved different places. We moved to Bergum, B-E-R-G-U-M, where my father had a farm, and from there we moved to Dokkum, D-O-K-K-U-M, and from there we went to America.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, what places in the Netherlands do you remember from when you were a little girl?

OOSTERMAN: Some of Bergum. That's where during the war my father was in the war and my mother was keeping the farm going with all of us children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember anything about that time when your father was away in the First World War?

OOSTERMAN: Well, I remember one night somebody came to the door and I don't know whether they were drunks or what they were, and my mother went through the barn out the back way and ran to the neighbor's house for help. When she came back to get whoever the person was trying to get in, away from the farm.

LEVINE: Wow, and were the children all there?

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, we were children. My sister Alice was born while my father was in the service. There was four of, five of us children.

LEVINE: Do you have any other memories of that period when your father was away?

OOSTERMAN: No, not really.

LEVINE: Do you remember grandparents at all?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, I remember grandmothers and one grandfather. My father's father. He used to work for the town. He'd go around mowing with a hand sickle, fields and all that kind of things, because my grandmother was home. My other grandmother was the one that had the farm where she brought up the children, after my grandfather died.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember any experiences with your grandmother?

OOSTERMAN: Oh, I used to visit her quite often. Every time my mother had a baby, then I was sent to grandma's house. So I was there several

times. Later on, when she moved to the city, then she lived with my aunt and I visited there quite a bit because I was named after her, and I was the first grandchild named after her, which of course was quite something. But first when my mother, which was the standards they have in Holland. My mother married a hired man, which was something was not being done. So there was quite a bit of friction there when the parents first got married, but later on they kind of consented, but it was never the same.

LEVINE: I see. What kind of a person was your grandmother?

OOSTERMAN: She was a nice person. She was big, but they have all this standard business, you know, and she married beneath her standard.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. Can you think of any kinds of, what would you call them? Hmm, standards or attitudes of the way things you should be done.

OOSTERMAN: You know, you were a farmer's daughter, you did not have anything to do with a hired man.

LEVINE: Oh.

OOSTERMAN: You were just not one of the family anymore. It made quite a difference in their lives.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah, huh, and then—so your father was working on your grandmother's farm, then?

OOSTERMAN: At that time when they got married.

LEVINE: I see.

OOSTERMAN: But then he went and got his own little farm. Whether they helped him or not, I don't know. He had his own little farm at one place where I was born, and then they moved to a different farm, a different town, and from there he went into the city, to Dokkum, where he worked in cement factory where they make all these cement—you know, like you have for all the sewers, you know. All these cements things, blocks.

LEVINE: Pipes.

OOSTERMAN: Pipes and all that kind of stuff. He worked there until we moved.

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LEVINE: I see. Uh-hmm. Do you remember any experiences with your father, any outings you went on with him or things you did with him?

OOSTERMAN: Not too much, no. I remember my father taking me—when you got young, five, six years old, with an old chair on the ice, teaching me how to skate. Everybody had to learn how to skate and we girls, we had to learn how to knit, right from—even in school we were taught how to knit. We had to knit. And I remember walking. After school I would have two brothers on each side hanging onto my skirt, but I had to knit so many inches every day on a sweater, so something, whatever it was knitted for, and I did that while I was walking, babysitting the brothers.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, this was because all the warm clothing—

OOSTERMAN: Yes, we made all these sweaters that you have. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, and how did it work with the chair on the ice? You would sit on the chair?

OOSTERMAN: No, I would have an old chair and I'd push the chair.

LEVINE: Oh.

OOSTERMAN: I would push the chair, but she would be there.

LEVINE: Like a walker, kind of.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah. Yeah, you know, you just have the back off the chair and you just pushed a chair along the ice to hold yourself up on. But everybody had to learn how to skate.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember any skating activities, any—

OOSTERMAN: Well, I remember one time the teacher, we were in school in the morning. He said, "Well, it's thawing out today. No school this afternoon." We all met at his house and then he lived right on the water. So then we all went there and skated and they treated us to chocolate and so on. Then also on the ice, we had tents all over the place. You go skating and they have all these different tents you could buy chocolate and coffee and donuts and whatever it was everywhere. Skate all around the city. It was, you know, very exciting and interesting, and have all these people that would sweep the ice all the time to keep it clean.

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LEVINE: Were these people that were like hired to do that or were they just—

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, a lot of those were like town help, you know, volunteer help. Or volunteer, but they're working for the town or somehow they did that.

LEVINE: Wow. Was business conducted by people skating to and from?

OOSTERMAN: Well, people skate from city to city?

LEVINE: Yeah.

OOSTERMAN: Well, when there wasn't any ice, of course, then the boats could go through. Then they would go from place to place.

LEVINE: Now, were boats used a lot also for business purposes?

OOSTERMAN: Oh, yes. I remember my uncle and them, they lived right across a big lake, so to get to their house, you always had to go on a little boat and row across to get to the house. Then if you wanted to come back or come over, you just holler at them to come on over. You know, they would come and get you and so on, but the only way you could get to their house would be to cross—unless you went way around the country through the fields.

LEVINE: Wow. How about fishing, was there any fishing?

OOSTERMAN: There was a lot of fishing. Had one of my brothers fished with my uncle. Did a lot of fishing. He was a fisherman. He was always fishing. A lot of fishing.

LEVINE: And so—well, your brother, you said, but you might as well—your mother's and father's names, and your mother's maiden name?

OOSTERMAN: My mother's name, in Dutch you spell it Y-T-J-E, and that's my name, Baptism name, too, but they transferred it when they came to this country, made Edith out of it.

LEVINE: Oh.

OOSTERMAN: And her maiden name was W-Y-G-A, Wyga.

LEVINE: I see. So your—would you spell again what Edith is in—

OOSTERMAN: T-J-E, Ytje.

LEVINE: And that does translate as Edith?

OOSTERMAN: Well, they translated to Edith, whichever.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

OOSTERMAN: It sounded like it was the nearest.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. So you went to school?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, I went to school in—

LEVINE: Do you have any remembrances of school?

OOSTERMAN: Well, I remember going to school and having all these lakes around. Well, lakes, there was about, you know, stepping on the ice one time when I thought it was strong and it wasn't and I went right through and got soaking wet. I had lunch for the kids, the other boys with me. So I had to turn around and go back home again, when they went to school. I just went through the ice into the water.

LEVINE: Wow. Was it scary? I mean, did you have [unclear]?

OOSTERMAN: Yes and no, it wasn't that deep, you know, wasn't that wide, but I just thought the ice was strong and it wasn't, and when I stepped on it, I went down and I got all wet and I had to turn around and walk back home and we had an hour walk back and forth to school and I was almost halfway, I guess. So we had to go back home again.

LEVINE: So you were the oldest daughter?

OOSTERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Yes.

OOSTERMAN: I had two older brothers.

LEVINE: So you had responsibility for the younger ones?

OOSTERMAN: Yes. Yeah.

LEVINE: And how about aunts and uncles, did you have any that you were close to or that you remember doing things with?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, I remember some of my uncles and aunts, my mother's sister. They didn't have any children, so they had, I don't know, one of these foreign children during the war.

LEVINE: Oh.

OOSTERMAN: Where were they from? I've forgotten what country she was from, but they had a girl that they brought up and so on. And my uncle was in the service, and he was what they call I think an under cover agent. He was—he would go around in England and write notes in a bottle and throw them in a—and they would get them in England, you know, from across the shore.

LEVINE: Wow.

OOSTERMAN: Then one time they said though, he had to dress like an old man. They said, "We'll let the old man go. He is no harm," but in the meantime he was doing all this underground work spying for the country, for the whatever.

LEVINE: Wow.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, and they tried to get him, but he had died a couple of days before they got a hold of him. If they had, they would have shot him on the spot.

LEVINE: Wow, do you remember him?

OOSTERMAN: Oh, yeah, very much so. Yeah, I had a piece in a book about it one time, too. Yeah, he was an offer [sic] of some kind in the service and then during that war he did all this spying, underground work, you know, that he did for them.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, he was what, your mother's—

OOSTERMAN: My mother's brother-in-law.

LEVINE: Brother-in-law, uh-huh, uh-huh.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how about religion? What do you remember about—was it called Christian Reform that you were involved with?

OOSTERMAN: Yeah. Well, in Dutch [speaks Dutch] it was, but it's the same as Christian Reformed, yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember any occasions, religious occasions or—

OOSTERMAN: No, mostly Christmas we had a Christmas program and services, Christmas day and the day after. Christmas was mostly all religious, church services, all that, and then the second day was mostly family affairs. Then they more family affair. The religious day was kind of separate from the regular.

LEVINE: I see.

OOSTERMAN: Routine. Of course, Thanksgiving—Christmas present was like December 6th, St. Nicholas Day. Then he would come, St. Nick's would come around with the—Black Peter they used to call him [Dutch] and give all the presents out. So nothing, that was completely separate from Christmas giving.

LEVINE: Oh.

OOSTERMAN: Christmas was strictly holiday, Christ's birth.

LEVINE: I see. Now, the Black Pete, what was the significance?

OOSTERMAN: He was Santa Claus' helper.

LEVINE: Oh.

OOSTERMAN: He was Santa Claus's helper, Saint Nick's helper.

LEVINE: And so were the children—you'd get little presents and—

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, we wouldn't get too much but one thing I know, we had these little—well, they're little candies. Little pieces—pastry like. [unclear] we called them, and the night or so before, somebody would come in. I remember in my home, they'd come in and throw them all over the floor and we kids would scramble for them and pick them all up and eat them. You know, that was something special. And also in school we'd have special. You know, they'd throw them around there. It was sanitary business wasn't considered. You know, we'd just grab them from the floor and eat them up and play with them, or whichever we done with them. That was one special I have. I haven't got it handy, but I have a whole piece that I wrote out about that for the Christmas in Holland. I used to write and do things, you know, stories, different things.

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- LEVINE: Oh, nice. Now, how do you spell that, the name of that pastry?
- OOSTERMAN: [unclear] pepper nuts. They're little like a marble. I made them last year. Not the last year or so, but I've made them a lot of times through here.
- LEVINE: Huh. Wow.
- OOSTERMAN: That was a specialty.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh, and let's see. What else? How about any other kinds of like what would your mother and father do for a social occasion? Did they have any—
- OOSTERMAN: Not much. They didn't have too much social life because between they were working and my mother had a big family. Like I said, she wasn't kind of in with her parent's side of the family, so really the only thing that they had was just church.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm, and how about the youngsters? How about you and your friends or would you do things for recreation that you can remember?
- OOSTERMAN: Not that much. Just skating. Jump rope and marbles. A lot of jump rope. Hopscotch.
- LEVINE: And did you have, was jump rope the way they have here, they have little sayings that you say when you jump?
- OOSTERMAN: Yeah, you have one by yourself or you have a bunch of them all these little sayings.
- LEVINE: Let's see, what else? Did you hear anything about America before you actually knew you were coming? When you knew you were coming?
- OOSTERMAN: No, not too much.
- LEVINE: So you didn't have expectations really at that age?
- OOSTERMAN: Not too much, no. I remember I was a friend of Hilda's sister-in-law. Her telling us that her brother, that was George, was in this country and then he would send shoes to them and so on because it was so cheap and he would send shoes back here and different things to the family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. You were wearing the wooden shoes?

OOSTERMAN: Yes. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did anybody continue that when they got here?

OOSTERMAN: Not too much. I got one hanging up over there.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, is that one made for wall hanging. That's not what it really looked like.

OOSTERMAN: No, but it's exactly the same thing.

LEVINE: It is, uh-huh.

OOSTERMAN: You would have them made to your feet, you know, different sizes. You'd go down and have your foot measured and then they would make them up, a piece of wood, you know, your size.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

OOSTERMAN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: So that would that be called a shoemaker?

OOSTERMAN: Well, wooden shoemaker, yeah.

LEVINE: A wooden shoemaker. So you'd go down—that's interesting. Describe that.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: You would what, stand on something?

OOSTERMAN: Stand and he'd shape your foot, so then he'd know how big they had to be. Then of course, they had to hollow them out—hollow them out. Of course, they have some ready if they fitted you and for dress up supposed to be like and just white. But sometimes for dress up then we'd have a little fancy. They would be painted, black, you know a little fancier. I know when I was twelve years old, my mother said I was a big girl now, so I got a pair of regular shoes. That's the first time I had regular shoes.

LEVINE: So that must have been quite a profession for a—I mean, he must have been busy.

OOSTERMAN: Oh, yes, there was a lot of those around.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and of course children's feet grow so quickly, you must have had to—

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, they didn't last that long, either.

LEVINE: Oh, they didn't?

OOSTERMAN: Sometimes they would break. We'd go take and kick them off and break the tops off and then have them fixed.

LEVINE: Do you remember what kind of wood they used then?

OOSTERMAN: I don't know what kind of wood it was. Like the story goes, you know, like the father counted all the wooden shoes by the door to see if the kids were all in bed, and there was one pair missing. So they checked out and one of the kids had their shoes on in bed.
[Chuckles]

LEVINE: Now, do you remember the house you lived in, what it looked like?

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, I had different ones. One was a farmhouse that has the barn right connected to the house. You just go through one door and you were right into the barn house where the cows were. The barn was hitched to the house, and we had the same kind of beds, too. It was in the wall that you slept in.

LEVINE: That seems to be a particularly Dutch phenomenon.

OOSTERMAN: Yes, it was. Later on we had other beds in a different room. Our last house was regular beds.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember like the stove or the kitchen, what it was like in the house?

OOSTERMAN: Well, I know we had a stove in the living room. In the kitchen there must have been some kind of a stove to cook on. I don't know just what it was. I think we had gas. Yeah, we had gas, I remember, in our house.

LEVINE: Oh. So that must have been more modern.

OOSTERMAN: That was a more modern place and that was a town, I don't know if you know the story about Saint Bonavic. He was a Catholic saint.

He was out in Holland there and he got killed. That was in the town we came from.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, what were the other religions, besides the Christian Reform?

OOSTERMAN: There was Catholics and other, you know, like Congregational and all different.

LEVINE: Different Protestant Sects?

OOSTERMAN: Different Protestants, yes.

LEVINE: And Jewish people, were there any?

OOSTERMAN: Some Jewish people. Not that much. Not at that time.

LEVINE: How about foods, do you recall any foods that your mother or grandmother made when you were little?

OOSTERMAN: Well, we had pea soup every so often, you know, and big family dishes and these one dish dinners.

LEVINE: And how about bread? Did they get that from—

OOSTERMAN: We had fresh bread, yeah, from the bakery come down. I remember where we lived, every Wednesday and I think Saturdays these wagons would come from the country with their fruits and vegetables and all different things and they would come to our city. See, Dokkum was quite a city on a marketplace. There would be like a market where you could go buy stuff and they would come and bring stuff to the stores.

LEVINE: Can you remember market day, going to the market?

OOSTERMAN: I think it was on Wednesdays. We didn't always go because we lived right there, you know, and they would also come around by the house with different things.

LEVINE: On a wagon?

OOSTERMAN: On a wagon. Yeah, I remember, you know, this butter milk with butter cooked through it. It was really in fact a dessert. They would come down and you could get it and get a quart or whatever it was and you'd have your dinner all ready. It was all ready made.

LEVINE: So in other words, that would be dinner. Like butter milk was rich enough—

OOSTERMAN: Well, that was a dessert. That particular day we would have just that with a loaf of—with a slice of bread or something like that, you know. Of course, we didn't get that many meals. Like my mother would get meat for the week and we'd all have a little piece on Sunday and the rest of the week with a little bit more water added to the gravy and then my father would get a little piece of the meat because he was the one that was working and needed the strength.

LEVINE: I see.

OOSTERMAN: And like eggs and things, you never got too many eggs either. So then my mother used to get the egg once in a while because she wasn't too strong and she needed it for strength. We were fortunate if we saw an egg just on Easter Sunday. And oranges and all that, it was—

LEVINE: Very rare.

OOSTERMAN: Very, very rare.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, know were there any fruits that grew in the Netherlands that you had?

OOSTERMAN: Any what?

LEVINE: Fruits?

OOSTERMAN: Well, there's some but we never saw too many of them. Apples. Grapes. You know, you just—we couldn't afford it. We weren't that class of people.

LEVINE: How about fish, did you eat much fish?

OOSTERMAN: Well, we ate some, yeah. I remember markets there, you could buy the fish all cooked. You go in, get your fish, take it home, eat it. But those were luxuries for our kind of people.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. Did you have any sense of what you would do when you grew up? When you—

OOSTERMAN: No, not really. Not really because the girls used to be taught how to keep house and all that, and you just grew up to get married and be a mother. That was the generally idea.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

OOSTERMAN: I did want to be a school teacher at one time, but that didn't work. That didn't pan out. Not when we came to this country, that was the end of that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

OOSTERMAN: But I was twelve years old and our school was small. So the teacher just says for those that have a big family at home, the girls, we could go home. So I was the one that I could go home. I didn't have to go to school anymore. There wasn't enough room in school, so I went home and helped my mother.

LEVINE: I see. Now, did you go to the Christian Reform School or did you go to public school?

OOSTERMAN: No, Christian school.

LEVINE: Most of the people that were involved in your church, they went to the church school? They didn't go to public school.

OOSTERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you left for Sherbourne, do you remember that journey to get there?

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, we went in the morning. We left—we were at different places and we all gathered early in the morning, I remember, and that's kind of a streetcar pulled with horses. Horses were pulling the streetcar from the dock where we were to another town, and over there we took a train to Amsterdam or [unclear], wherever we went.

LEVINE: Well, now, what did your mother pack, do you remember?

OOSTERMAN: Everything that she wanted. Not big furniture. Treasures stuff, you know, all the clothing. I don't know just how much she packed, but they had four or five big trunks like full of stuff. Some furniture stuff like some of these personal thing that she valued a great deal. But I don't know—I don't think they carried any like kitchen tables or any of those kind of things.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the treasures that your mother chose to bring?

OOSTERMAN: Well, she had some silverware or something she had. You know, there are all kinds of inspections and she had my youngster brother was a year and a half, so she still had a diaper bag with her. So she put that in the bottom of the bag and then put the kids on top. So they opened the bag, "Oh, dirty diapers." So that's as far as they went. And some of those things, but when we came from after New York to Providence on the boat, there was a fire there and then one of our trunks wasn't painted. It was one, the last one they put all the stuff in that was left, which had a lot of my personal little things I had in it, you know, autograph book and all that left over stuff that got put in last, and that's the one they threw overboard. Not all of them, just one. Just one of them. That one happened to be the last they picked up for all the leftovers, and did not get painted like the rest of them did, all one color.

LEVINE: I see.

OOSTERMAN: So with the fire they threw all this merchandise overboard and that happened to be one of the trunks that went overboard. So I missed up on all these little things we wanted, you know.

LEVINE: But can you think of anything else besides the autograph book that you wanted to take with you?

OOSTERMAN: Different things my mother had and the kids had. You know, that last minute stuff that you put in, pictures and different things.

LEVINE: I see. Wow.

OOSTERMAN: Because I had all the girlfriends write in it, you know, and all that and different ones. Yeah, all those things are gone.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's sad. So let's see. So when you got—you were saying that you got to—was it when you got to Sherbourne that you had to wait then for the week?

OOSTERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Why don't you tell about that?

OOSTERMAN: Well, we had a—my brother had taken French in school, a little bit, so my mother wanted a cup of tea very badly. He would say what she wanted or what he wanted, but we just had a good time at meals. We had a big room where all of us were sleeping in and our meals and like that. A bathroom. We didn't know what to do first because all it had was a hole in the ground and you'd have to squat

over the hole because you didn't have any toilets to sit on. We weren't going to use those things, but that was all there was, so after awhile you do use those things. But we, a kids we had a good time because we had free running around. There was the mountains there and you had to be back for meals and at night. In the meantime, we had appointments where they cleaned us all up.

LEVINE: Yeah, why don't you tell about what the problem was. Why you were delayed.

OOSTERMAN: These little nits that you have, they get in the hair. Well, there was three of us girls, we had them and so they wouldn't even let you go on the boat and pass in the country or whatever. So that's we had to go over there for, get those all—our hair all taken, cleaned out and so and then we could go. That was the biggest problem.

LEVINE: Now, did you get those en route or did—

OOSTERMAN: No, there was a lot of lice around, you know. Like especially some of these places and we had had it but we didn't have any lice. But there was still some of these little nits in our hair.

[End of Tape One, Side A/Start of Tape One, Side B]

LEVINE: So the name of the boat?

OOSTERMAN: Orduno.

LEVINE: Orduno.

OOSTERMAN: I think I'm quite sure that's it.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything about the voyage?

OOSTERMAN: No, that was good.

LEVINE: Were you—now, how were you traveling? Were you in steerage? Were you in—

OOSTERMAN: We were Third Class.

LEVINE: Third Class.

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OOSTERMAN: There were two kinds of Third Class. The one we were in, and then there was another one way at the other board where everybody seemed to be just different group.

LEVINE: So you were in a cabin?

OOSTERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: With just your family?

OOSTERMAN: Uh-huh. We had a couple of cabins, I think, because there were so many of us. But I know my mother was very sick. My father wasn't. Everybody else was sick for a long time. You know, so many days.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and did you explore the boat or anything?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, we'd wander all over the boat. I remember one night my father was looking for me and I was very nicely sitting on the stairs watching the First Class dancing or something like that and I was just sitting there, and he come looking for me all over the boat. I was told to get back to my cabin in a hurry.

LEVINE: What was your father like as a person, as a personality/

OOSTERMAN: He was good. He was a nice person, yeah.

LEVINE: And let's see, what else? So do you remember the boat coming into the New York Harbor?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, but not too much. You know, all excited.

LEVINE: Did you know what the Statue of Liberty was?

OOSTERMAN: No, but we heard about it. The couple that was with us, the people that was my mother's cousin and his wife and three children.

LEVINE: And what? They had returned?

OOSTERMAN: They went to Holland on a vacation. They lived here. They went to Holland on vacation. He was my mother's cousin. So when they got visiting there, they persuaded my folks to come to America with them. To leave Holland and to go to America because there was no future in Holland for a family with—a big family like we had. There was no future there at all for the boys growing up and our father. So my cousin, my mother's cousin, persuaded my folks to

get rid of everything over there and to come back to America with them, and that's what we did.

LEVINE: So did your parents sell off whatever they could?

OOSTERMAN: Well, we were just renting at the time, I guess. I know we had a sale of furniture and all that kind of stuff.

LEVINE: And so when the boat docked at Ellis Island, do you remember anything about Ellis Island?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, what stands out mostly with me, we went in—I don't know, it was kind of a barn like. It wasn't that elaborate, I don't think, and then there was a fence through here or a fence apart and you could go this way and this way. So we went, most of us went this way, but when they got to my mother, they made my mother go this way and she had my brother with them, the baby. He was a year and a half. My mother was lame. She walked lame with one side and they made her go down that way and it was, oh, a long time after before she finally came back. In the meantime, they had made her strip and undress and parade in front of all these different doctors to find out what caused her lameness. If it was something that was inherited, or whether it was something that was contagious, or whatever it was. But she had since she was born. But I know she was very, very upset, you know, coming with a year and a half old youngster that would be fussing and for her to parade around all these people. You can't speak a word of English, and my father and all the rest of us sitting around waiting wondering what they done to her. Where she was and what happened to her. That really is outstanding.

LEVINE: Now, what happened? The verdict was that she was okay?

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, she was all right. Yeah, so they let her, you know, go through.

LEVINE: Do you remember being examined at all?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, at different times.

LEVINE: And—

OOSTERMAN: Especially waiting for the boats, and then you'd have to get an examination and a vaccination again. Vaccination this and all that, and vaccination on that arm.

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LEVINE: So how long did you stay in Ellis Island, do you remember?

OOSTERMAN: Ellis Island? Not that long.

LEVINE: You got—

OOSTERMAN: I think you go in and go through all that business and come right back again. We didn't stay on Ellis Island at night.

LEVINE: You didn't stay over night?

OOSTERMAN: No. Then we went to a Seamen's Home in Hoboken. We stayed there. That was run by the Christian Reform people.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. That's how you happened to go there.

OOSTERMAN: Yes, and then I remember there was a rocking chair in the room and none of us would sit in that rocking chair because rocking chair was for babies. So my little brother got sitting in that rocking chair, but nobody else would sit in that rocking chair because that was for babies, you know.

LEVINE: You didn't have rocking chairs?

OOSTERMAN: No, we never did in Holland. Just, you know, a rocking chair for the baby, little ones. I remember that. None of us kids would sit in it because that was for the baby.

LEVINE: And how about the Seaman's Home, do you remember anything else about that?

OOSTERMAN: No, it was a nice place. It was a good place. I remember we kids were hungry and my father and the cousin, they had gone off walking somewhere and we were hungry. So somehow finally we got a cheese sandwich from somewhere and it had lettuce on it and cheese, but we didn't want the lettuce because that was rabbit food. We'd never had lettuce. So we took the lettuce off, but we did eat the cheese sandwich because we kids were hungry. But we wouldn't eat lettuce because that was rabbit food. You know, I mean you didn't know any better.

LEVINE: And so how long were you there?

OOSTERMAN: Not too long. We had to stay there until we got a boat to—we were there one or two nights, and then we got the boat from New York to Providence.

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LEVINE: Oh, and you knew you were coming to Massachusetts?

OOSTERMAN: Yes. [Buzzer sounds] Oh, who's over there?

LEVINE: Wait. We're going to stop for a minute here. [tape off/on] Okay, we're resuming now, after a visit from your grandson—daughter in-law. Okay. Let's see, so we were talking about you got the bus to Providence. Or the boat, rather, to Providence.

OOSTERMAN: Uh-hmm. We had a fire on the boat.

LEVINE: Do you know what happened?

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, I understand there was a couple of fellows smoking in bed, started the fire.

LEVINE: Oh, and—

OOSTERMAN: We were rushed from our boat, taken—you know, we couldn't get our door open, my sister and I, very well, and I had two suitcases and we were taken and dumped into a freight boat that came along off side of the boat. We were rescued from this one boat to the freight boat that came along.

LEVINE: Was everyone rescued?

OOSTERMAN: Yes. Yeah, yeah, they got the fire out after they took all the people off the boat, and then my brother got sick or something. We got the captain's room. They put us in the captain's room with so many of us.

LEVINE: So you—it was right near Providence when the boat took fire?

OOSTERMAN: Well, it was in the middle of the night, so probably halfway between New York and Providence.

LEVINE: Wow. So you arrived then in Providence on this freighter?

OOSTERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: The rescue ship.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Let's see. So then what happened once you hit—

OOSTERMAN: Well, then the men had to go out and check out in all the freight and we lost one of the trunks, and they had to get all that business straightened out before we finally got on the train to go from Providence to Whitinsville. Then when we got to Whitinsville there was people that they had notified. They were Oostermans. Came to Whitin—to the station to meet us. Two or three different families because there was quite a few of us. That's how we got acquainted with the Oosterman. I married a son later on and my brother married another Oosterman's later on. So that's how we got connected with the Oosterman family.

LEVINE: I see. So did you actually meet your husband that first night, the first day that you go to Providence?

OOSTERMAN: Well, I met him the first day, but I did not—I was only twelve at the time and later years he was married and he had one daughter and his wife died. Then I went to take care of his wife at his sister's house and then I got married—then we got married. Then the Lord told me, I asked one night about it and the Lord says to me, "You're going to be the mother." I said, "Some day maybe she will have another mother," and then I could hear somebody speak and tell me, "You are to be her next mother." So I, in the middle of the night, and I opened up the light and I says, "Oh, no, who has talked to me?" And I said, "That was a voice telling me that someday I was going to be"—and a year later we got married and Helen was five, six years old at the time. She's been like—we never considered daughter in-law or step daughters or like that. She was my daughter, that's all. So that's the way that worked.

LEVINE: Well, now, were the Oosterman's a large family that had settled here that were from the Netherlands? Is that how—

OOSTERMAN: Yes, they came gradually, too. My father in-law came first and then my mother in-law and the others. He came first with the oldest daughter and then later on she came with the rest of the children and they had a bakery in town for years. The bake shop.

LEVINE: And did your husband also work in the bakery shop?

OOSTERMAN: He did, yeah, most of the time and then he worked different places. Then later on we had fruit and vegetables. He went around to houses peddling fruit and vegetables when we got married. That's what he did for a long time. He used to go house to house. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, when you got here at twelve years old, did you go to school here?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, I went to school down in [unclear]. Didn't know any English, but then like at night after school or different things, the teacher would try to help us a bit to get the language. That's all we were here for, the language. We had all the arithmetic and all that business. Well, I could do those sums and everything good. You didn't do them in English, but you saw the figures and you did it the same way. You know, you got the same answers. It's just the language that you had to catch.

LEVINE: So did you have a helpful teacher or teachers?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, I had good teachers.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

OOSTERMAN: Clark and so on. Different ones.

LEVINE: And how about your mother and father? Did they persist in speaking Dutch at home?

OOSTERMAN: They learned eventually because my father went to work in a factory, in a foundry. He worked nights there for a while and then he'd walk an hour back home. Worked from three to eleven, then he'd walk all the way down and all the way out in the country every night. My mother learned. My mother was determined learn more. She would take our kids' books and wanted to read. She wanted to learn English more. So, yeah, they did all right. They're not fluently. At the time, of course, too, we had the church service first were in Dutch all the time, but after we got there, they changed. They had one English and one Dutch. Of course, a few years later everything is English, but as long as they were partially in Dutch and partially in English, you didn't learn the English language very fast.

LEVINE: No, no.

OOSTERMAN: Then we had a Dutch store man, a grocery man that come down. So folks didn't really have to learn that much. It's different nowadays.

LEVINE: So did your mother and father—do you think they were happy they had come here?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, I think they were. I think my mother was lonesome at times, missed her mother, and then when her mother died, well, of course, we were here and my father's mother. But after—they went back for a trip at one time and they used to talk about Holland this and Holland that. You know, everything was still more or less, but after they went back for a trip once, then they came back, then they were satisfied. Because then Holland seemed so small and everything was so small and then, you know, people had gone. After that they were more content to stay, you know, to be satisfied where they were.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So was it a long time? Had they been here for quite awhile before they went back to see it?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, because we were married.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Huh. Now, how about you? Do you have any desire or have you gone back?

OOSTERMAN: I was back in '73, '74. I took a trip around the world. My son was stationed in Saigon, so we went, you know, through Hawaii. My daughter in-law's mother went with me. Hawaii and Saigon and all these places in between. You stopped in Switzerland and Italy and all these places, and we finished up in Holland, where I saw the school I went to, and that looked very small, and the church looked very small, and I still met some of my relatives. There was a couple aunts living yet, and a lot of cousins. Yeah, that was a very interesting trip.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, how do you feel about yourself, as far as being Dutch or being American?

OOSTERMAN: Not that much. Used to be, "Oh, you old Dutchman. You Dutchman," but that's kind of—you don't resent a bit so much, the way some people now do that. Somehow or other you just—it wasn't that big a deal because we were very well respected. Dutch people were well respected in this town. It wasn't for a lot of Dutch people. Lots of Dutch farmers and all them around it. Nowadays there aren't that many any more, but at that time they were very well up in the town.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. I mean, your religion carried over.

OOSTERMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: From the old country to here.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, religion carried over. We still have devotions when we eat and so on. That's what lacking in the country.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

OOSTERMAN: The Bible in school, prayer in school, all that. Never had the trouble with the people the way a lot of it is nowadays.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you—would you have any advice maybe for like new immigrants coming in from other places today? Based on your experience of coming as a twelve year old?

OOSTERMAN: Well, you just get up and work. Don't expect to get a big job like you had before. You start from the bottom up, if you want to get anywhere. Don't be afraid to stick out your hands and work. You don't go on welfare, not if you can possibly dig ditches or something else. When my son came out of the service, he says, "Well, you can go on Welfare, Ray." "Oh, no, I'd rather work on a farm," he says. "Anything else," he says, "I will not go on welfare." And that's what he did, he worked himself from the Post Office up, cleaning the rooms and the toilets and whatnots, until he got way up high into his office where he did by working and doing. You know, you don't have it handed to you.

LEVINE: Can you think of any kind of rules for living or tenets or whatever you want to call it that your mother and father passed along to you and your brothers and sisters that you in turn passed along to your children?

OOSTERMAN: Well, it's first, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and walk in His ways." You don't do the worldly things. You ask, "Oh, Lord, what do you want me to do?" And you just don't go on your own, do this. You don't go a lot of the other things. You have no desire to serving all these other things. Then you try to bring the children up the same way. Some have drifted away.

LEVINE: And I take it, when you ask the Lord, he answers, as he did with you.

OOSTERMAN: Yes, he does. Yes. People think that's funny or something and I says, "No, that's the truth."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Let's see, is there anything else about your life in this country and—let's see. You met your husband and you—were you working between the time you stopped school?

OOSTERMAN: Yes, I left school when I was thirteen, fourteen and I did housework. I went to different homes and did housework. Different families I have been into.

LEVINE: And did you do that up until the time you were married?

OOSTERMAN: Until I was married. Then of course I was married and I had a six year old daughter right away.

LEVINE: Right. So then you stayed home. Or did you work, too?

OOSTERMAN: Yes. [Coughs] I did stay home. During the war I did go working in a factory on a airplane business and so on, but then my daughter was big enough so that I went in at three. She came out of school at two. She could stay home with the other children to take over.

LEVINE: So what prompted you to go to work during the war?

OOSTERMAN: Well, help out. My husband wasn't making that much, and the family and everybody helped during the war to work. [unclear] need a job on parts for airplanes and all that. Later on I did go back to work. I worked in a hat shop making all kinds of hats.

LEVINE: What was that like?

OOSTERMAN: That was fun. It was different, but then the kids were bigger.

LEVINE: Now, how many children did you have?

OOSTERMAN: I had four boys.

LEVINE: Oh.

OOSTERMAN: And—[Coughs]—and Helen. My throat bothers me. Helen was the oldest and then I had four boys. One lives in town.

LEVINE: What is his name?

OOSTERMAN: James.

LEVINE: James.

OOSTERMAN: James, and he's married and he's got three of his own children and he's got five or six adopted ones. They're all out of the house right now. They're all either married or what. He brought them all up.

LEVINE: And then your other children?

OOSTERMAN: And the second one, he died when he was thirty-one. He lived in Michigan, and the third one lives in California. He was the one that we visited in Saigon. He was in the service.

LEVINE: Now, what are their names, the second and the third?

OOSTERMAN: The second one was Leonard and the third one is Ralph. He has an air conditioning business in Sacramento and the youngest one was Raymond.

LEVINE: And do they have children? Do you have grandchildren? The first one has.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, Leonard has—had four children and they're mostly married. They're all married and Ralph had two and two adopted and Ray had just the one boy.

LEVINE: So you have a number of grandchildren.

OOSTERMAN: I have about twenty-four grandchildren and more than that in great grandchildren.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

OOSTERMAN: Of course, when my son has three, and the other six, and they're married and they're all getting—even the adopted ones, we figure they're yours.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah, uh-huh. Well, how is this—I know you just suffered the loss of your son, but how is this period of your life? This sort of old age period of—

OOSTERMAN: Well, I still try to manage to get to church every Sunday, whichever comes up. Then like we have here, we have a nice group of people. I have one of the ladies that we visit quite a bit. I still drive my car and get groceries and take Hilda along with me. We go grocery shopping and then we go out for lunch and different other things that come up. I do a lot of knitting.

LEVINE: Oh, you still knit?

OOSTERMAN: I knit, knit all the time. I knit all kinds of hats for the babies for the hospital. Then I knit hats for the Salvation Army for Kids for

America. I got a whole bag full out there. Then you knit for the grandchildren, the great grandchildren mostly now that you knit for. I do a lot of knitting.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, well, that must be satisfying.

OOSTERMAN: Yes, that's relaxing and it's satisfying. You have to get your own meals and do your own cooking and cleaning up, whatever.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, is there anything else you can think of that has to do with having immigrated to this country as a young girl and living out your last years—

OOSTERMAN: No, I think it was just one of these things that was planned for us in the Lord's way that we had to come to this country and meet our mates and whatnots and so on. There was a future here for my father with the grown up boys that they would not have had in Holland there. No, I don't think so. Just thankful to be here and be able to have freedom and whatever.

LEVINE: Well, you would have had that there, wouldn't you?

OOSTERMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: You had the freedom. It was just the economic opportunity, it sounds like.

OOSTERMAN: Yeah, he didn't have the opportunity for the families like you do here. No.

LEVINE: Well, have you visited Ellis Island?

OOSTERMAN: No, I haven't. No, I haven't been up there.

LEVINE: Do you have any interest in that?

OOSTERMAN: Well, I might, but now I don't travel that much anymore. Trouble with my legs a bit and I fell on the ice a year or so ago, so my back is kind of bothering me and the legs. So you don't travel so much anymore. When I did travel, I went to California a few times and Michigan, when my other son was living. So now you don't travel that much anymore and you don't get out that much anymore.

LEVINE: Well, that makes it nice that you have such a nice community here.

OOSTERMAN: Yes, it's nice here.

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LEVINE: Okay, well, I want to thank you so much.

OOSTERMAN: Oh, you're welcome.

LEVINE: For this most interesting interview.

OOSTERMAN: You're welcome.

LEVINE: Very interesting, and I'm speaking with Edith Oosterman, who came from the Netherlands in 1922 when she was twelve. It's July 3rd, 1995 and this is Janet Levine and I'm signing off.

[End of Interview]