

Albert de Vos
Dutch Immigrant
Groote Beer 1953



In 1952 my father received a letter from a friend from his hometown, Steenwijk, The Netherlands. His friend and his wife had emigrated the year before and knew my father was not happy in the Netherlands. He extolled the virtues of living in Canada; a land of opportunity for those who were ambitious and worked hard. My father was convinced that Canada was for him but my mother was not so sure. She was afraid she would never learn English and would rather go to South Africa where Dutch was prevalent. My father was aware of the racial tensions already present in South Africa and persuaded my mother that Canada would be much better for their young family.

So on March 19, 1953 Jack and Anne (who was 7 months pregnant) and their two sons, Albert (aged 6) and Reyn (aged 3) boarded the Holland America converted freighter Groote Beer in Rotterdam. My mother, brother and I were in a cabin with another woman and her two children, and my father was in steerage with other men either single or married. This arrangement saved some money that could better be used in the new land. We had a stormy passage, sighting icebergs and whales along the way. I remember that in the dining room the tables were bolted to the floor and the chairs had chains attached to their underside to prevent them from sliding all over the place. Eating in rolling seas was an adventure. As the ship rolled to one side, the chairs on one side of the table would slide away from the table while the other side would slide toward the table.

According to the log my father kept of the voyage, we had several days of wind force 4 and even some days of force 6 and 7.

I awoke quite early morning and with most of the others in the cabin suffering from seasickness. The room had a foul smell. I took to walking the decks before breakfast. I remember one particularly stormy morning when lifelines had been installed around the ship that when my father came to collect me for breakfast, I was nowhere in sight. He thought I had been swept overboard. In a panic, he searched the decks for me. He finally found me near the bow of the ship, (under the bridge) just as the ship rolled on its side in the heavy swell. "Nice waves, hey Dad". He took me by the hand and with the help of the lifelines gingerly guided me back inside to have breakfast. I was never seasick on the whole trip. We were supposed to land in Halifax on March 27 but the winds and tide were

against us. The captain aborted the landing after nearly smashing into the quay after a tugboat line snapped. We anchored in the harbour and safely landed the next morning.

My mother and brother were glad to be on terra firma, as they had been seasick for the whole voyage. Once through customs, we boarded the train bound for Edmonton, Alberta where my dad's friend lived. We arrived in Edmonton on April 1, 1953. The next day my father, who was a veterinary inspector at an abattoir in the Netherlands, went in search of a job. He found work at Queen City Meat as a meat cutter, which he eventually purchased from the original owners in 1967. The first years were difficult. We had to start all over. My mother wanted to learn English and wanted every one to speak English at home. As a result, we seldom spoke Dutch at home. My father who had taken English lessons in the Netherlands always spoke English with a slight accent, but my mother never had an accent. My memories of school in Edmonton were mixed. I found friends quickly and soon could speak some English. I passed Grade 1 with hardly any English. I had gone to kindergarten in the Netherlands where we were taught to print, add and subtract, etc., something many of the others in Grade 1 could not master. Some of the kids in school called me a "D.P." because of my broken English. That hurt. Over the summer of 1953, our English improved greatly, thanks to friends from school.

What I miss most of all is having no aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents. Our family was the only one to immigrate to Canada. All our relatives still live in the Netherlands. But we do keep contact with them. Some have come to Canada for vacation or we have gone back to visit.