

Mels van der Laan
Dutch Immigrant
Rijdam
December 9, 1955



Born Melchior Franciscus
van der Laan, the youngest
of five children. The oldest being my brother Han, 17 years my senior,



three sisters, Adre, Mien and Gre, then yours truly, fondly known as Mels. Although very young at the time, I still can see the invading troops marching down the Dijk where I lived. I also remember the liberation of our part of Holland, when the Canadian, British and American soldiers came through our town of Lisse in 1945.

My fathers' business was growing bulbs for export, along with my brother as his apprentice helper. In 1950, my brother decided to immigrate to Canada with his new bride, Annie. Their trip to Canada was made on a troop ship, the facilities on that boat were not the best. They arrived in Halifax, NS and proceeded through Pier 21 and then on to Vernon, BC.

Han worked for a Bill Osborne for awhile. The conditions were frightful, they lived in a run down bin where you saw the stars at night through holes in the roof. No running water, no furniture, an outhouse, plus my sister-in-law was expected to do house work for the Mrs. All this for seventy-five dollars a month. The neighbours were kindhearted people and found a better employer and accommodations for them.

Back in Holland I had completed my last year in agricultural school and was preparing my speech for the graduating class (Valedictorian class of '52); I would then go into business with my father.

Fate had a different road for me to travel. We had a visitor, one Nick Verbruggen, a bulb salesman who traveled extensively across North America and on one of his trips, he visited with my brother in Lavington, BC. After his return to The Netherlands, he was invited to come and have supper with our family and talk about his adventures abroad, and

especially about our family in Canada. One of the attractions for me about this great country, was Nick's story about gold. He told us if you go to BC, you might be walking on a dirt road somewhere and as you kick the dirt or rocks, it was possible to find nuggets of gold at your feet. Being a teenager, who would not want to come to a place where the roads were covered with gold?

To the amazement of my parents and my sisters. I decided to immigrate and follow in my brother's footsteps.

Although my parents did not like the idea of me leaving, dad gave his blessing. He and mom were unhappy but they must have known



that the opportunities in Canada were much better than in Holland. My sisters now had an incentive to visit two brothers and yes all have made journeys to this wonderful country.

The ship SS Rijdam departed from Rotterdam Harbour on November 30th, 1955 and went to LeHavre, France and Manchester, England before setting its course for Canada. My father, two sisters, Mien and Gre, my brother-in-law Jan, husband of my oldest sister, and my best friend, Pier den Butter, were at the harbour to bid farewells. A mixture of excitement and turmoil kept running through me. A sadness to leave my native homeland but a tingle of delight [in] the beginning of a new journey.

I arrived in Halifax Harbour early morning on the 9th of December 1955, and went through the hanger at Pier 21 around noon. The multitude of people walking down that passage was beyond belief. Waiting by the wooden benches under the letter 'v' for my name to be called. A little different, because in Holland I would have been standing by the letter 'L'. After being cleared through customs I was ready to continue the rest of my travels.

While waiting for the train, that would eventually take me west, I ventured on to the streets of Halifax and asked a passerby to take a picture of me. But no one was willing, in all likelihood they did not understand a word I was saying. At the time I did not have a good command of the English language.

The photos I enclose, a street in Halifax, a photo of myself and the bow of the Rijdam with the Dutch flag greeting the Canadian flag, at that time the Union Jack.

Everything I possessed, my clothes and memories were in a light tan suitcase, the only luggage I carried. My trip, across the ocean was jointly financed by the Canadian and Dutch governments, they also gave me \$75.00 for the ten-day voyage. Considering that there was entertainment on the ship with a cash bar, and of course at that time I was a smoker, so \$75.00 for the voyage was not a great amount.

A train ticket to BC plus \$50.00 for food and necessity was given to us by the ships purser just before disembarkment at Halifax harbour.



Boarding the train for the West Coast of Canada, I remember the wooden benches, the pot belly wood stove. If you wanted a drink of water you had to pass by several connecting cars in order to get the water. Sleeping facilities were very scarce on that train. For myself, a single fellow, I could cope, but I felt so sorry for families with babies and small children. The beds that were available were left to them, the rest of us slept sitting up on the wooden train seats.

If you wanted to eat, you could buy food at a store, when the train stopped at a station. That is if it was in the daytime and if there was a store around.

My trip took five days and five nights. The scenery was nothing but trees and tracks. Coming from Europe were every few miles the landscape was dotted with villages, towns or farmland. In Montréal, we stopped for several hours and I remember two Dutch girls who were on their way to Saskatchewan, they got off the train and went with a couple of Canadian sailors. When it was time to depart

the station, the girls were nowhere to be seen and the train left without them.

I arrived at Kamloops, BC train station at 0200am on December 16th where I was greeted by my big brother and we then drove the 80 miles to Lavington, BC. This gave us lots of time to catch up on all the family gossip from Lisse.

This was my first Christmas in Canada and the celebration was much different than in Holland. Here in Lavington everyone working in the logging camps were off a week before Christmas and did not return to the camps till the second week in January. Alcoholic beverages flowed like an open spigot, one continuous party.

In The Netherlands, it was a festive but quiet time, visiting with friends, relatives and celebrating the birth of Christ with frequent visits to church.

After the holidays, I landed a job working for Alphons Snyder in a logging camp, about 10 miles from Lumby, BC this was an experience by its self. I call this the "Chocolate Caper". Someone offered me chocolate and being polite I took not one piece but two or three pieces when the host offered it. Much to my dismay I was quite sick for a number of days, and nearly ended up in hospital. They treat they offered was exlax, need I say more.



I changed jobs and went to work for Iver Hanson, on the Monasee Mountain 50 miles west of Lumby and ran into some real characters. An old Swede, a Dane, a couple of Doukabours and myself, the only Dutchman; once again the language was a stumbling block.

Learning came quickly. No one would give you anything unless you asked for it. So if you were in the cook shack and wanted to eat, you had better learn how to ask for the food you wanted because reaching in front of anyone was a no, no. I saw a fork jabbed into a person hand for not asking and reaching across the table to get what he wanted. Where food was involved, you learned the best way you could and made sure that you used your manners, like 'please pass the peas' or 'more meat please' etc etc and always a 'thank you' at the end of the sentence. The guys were a rough and tough bunch but at meal times everyone had manners,

if not, you didn't eat. Oh, what wonderful food they had in those camps: eggs, sunny-side up or over, boiled or poached, scrambled or well done, and this phenomenal food called steak. I was introduced to a desert called pie, unheard of in my part of Holland. I would put in an order for pumpkin and savour the flavour and eat the whole pie at one sitting.

Here I learned a card game called poker. At first I always lost money. However, it did not take long to learn the rules and read the cards and soon I was winning the legal tender.

After two years in the interior of British Columbia, I left for Vancouver Island and worked a spell for Macmillan and Bloedell in Port Alberni at the lumber mill.

In 1957 I decided to go back to school and become a welder. I passed the course with flying colours, earned my BC certificate and moved to Prince George. I worked as a welder and millwright for Church Sawmill in Willow River. Here I met Russell Dalton a 'cat' driver. He kept a close watch over this young pilgrim, taught me how to handle heavy equipment and we became the best of friends.

At times I felt like a wondering nomad, looking for gold. Travelling to Alberta, somewhere between Calgary and Drumheller, I was hired as a welder by Bill Rieger. Bill was the owner of a welding and machine shop. Here, I first had contact with the Hutterites, a very hard-working people. I visited Rosebud Colony several times to do welding. I was approached by one of the elders to come and stay with them and teach some of the younger men how to weld. I still have regrets that I did not take up the challenge.

Now a little nostalgic for Holland, it was time for a visit to see family, revisit old friends and school buddies and ponder over past history. Most of my buddies thought I was full of you know what, when I told them about my adventures in Canada. But as long as this rich Canuck had money and was buying drinks, they were willing to sit and listen. When the money ran out, I was left with my real friends, "oh what a lesson I learned". By the way, I had to ask big brother in Canada for funds so I could return to BC. After staying at my parent's home for three months, it was time to fly back to Canada. Upon my return, I wandered and worked, in Revelstoke on road construction and in the Okanagan Valley in the orchards.

In August of 1960, my brother, his seven-year-old son and three-year-old daughter went on an early morning fishing trip. After seeing them off, I left for Vernon to meet with some of the loggers. On my return, it was ten o'clock at night, my sister in law met me in the drive and said that

Han, Johnny and Nancy had not returned home. I drove to the spot where I thought they would be, but in the middle of the night it was impossible to find them.

The neighbours were alerted and as soon as day broke, a nearby resident used his small aircraft to look for the trio. He spotted the car and the search began on foot. Nancy was found hiding behind a tree, she had not eaten for 24 hours. A forestry helicopter spotted my brother and nephew floating in an eddy about 2pm. They had drowned in the Shuswap River, divers went in and retrieved their bodies.

Life took on new meaning and in 1961 I joined the Canadian Army, enlisting in Vancouver, BC "Jerico Beach: and enrolled in the Canadian Military Police. In 1962, I changed units to the R.C.E. (Royal Canadian Engineers) and served with exemplary service for 35 years. With tours of Europe, The Middle East, from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast of Canada and the Arctic.

In 1964, I married a Canadian girl, my friend and confidante of thirty-five



years. We have three industrious sons and a wonderful daughter. Our eldest received his Engineering degree at Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario. Our second child went to the University of Western

Ontario for his degree in Physical Education. Number three son has since returned to school and is studying Computer Science. Our youngest, studied Early Childhood Education at Lambton College, works part-time and is presently up-grading her skills in customer service.

My wife and I took an early retirement, bought a farm in South Western Ontario, and life has come full circle for me. Here we raise Dutch Texel sheep for extra income, grow bulbs for pleasure, not for export, in our friendship garden, and marvel how this country has been so good to us.

I never found those gold nuggets, however, Canada gave me more than gold. A place where freedom surpasses ones' wildest dreams, where you can look at yourself in the mirror and be thankful for what you have accomplished. This is an immeasurable country, full of opportunities. God Bless this land. In 1955, I crossed the Atlantic Ocean, landed at Pier 21 with a small suitcase, a one way train ticket west and \$50 bucks in my pocket. Canada is home, what more can I say "O' CANADA" thank you.