

Rita Wilson nee Van
Arkel
Dutch Immigrant
Zuiderkruis
February 20, 1952



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The Van Arkel family of Aalsmeer, the Netherlands and consisting of father Huibert Johannes Van Arkel, born in October 1911, mother Janna Hendrika Van Arkel-Kammeraad, born January 1912, daughter Janna (Jan), born December 1938, daughter Gysberty (Betty), born February 1941, daughter Hendrika (Ria), born March 1944, son Huibert (Herb), born February 1946 and daughter Aveline born December 1949, is going to emigrate to Ontario, Canada.

A truck with a large wooden packing crate is sitting outside in the driveway and the furniture, clothing, bedding, etc, is being methodically packed into the crate. Only the necessary furniture and a very few luxury items are going, everything else has been sold or given away. Herb has been standing patiently beside the truck for a long time, with his shovel in his hands, waiting for one of the men to tell him that there is a space for his shovel, because that little shovel just has to go to Canada. Jan's bookcase is sitting on the living room floor, ready to go to the cousins, when one of the men says there is room in the crate for some of her books, and so it goes with some of our favourite belongings. When the crate is full and the house empty, the family then moves in with relatives (ome Jan and tante Jaantje Kammeraad and their four children) for about 10 days. This makes quite a house full, as houses are not too big, and there are seven of us to find beds for.

Seven girls now have to share one bedroom, mattresses are everywhere, even in the closet, where we take turns sleeping. Each night there is debate as to who gets to sleep in the closet, because it certainly is much more fun than sleeping in a bed.

Finally the day of departure arrives, February 12, 1952. A family friend, Huib Verbeek takes us and all our luggage in his car to the port in Rotterdam where we board our home for the next eight days, the immigrant ship the "Zuiderkruis". This ship was once a freighter, it was then converted to a troop ship and later became an immigrant ship, carrying 800 men, women and children to Canada on every crossing. Because the ship used to be a freighter, she is high and narrow and has

not stabilizers so she rolls from side to side as well as front to back, but of course we did not find that out until we hit the ocean.

Our cabin is in the very bottom of the ship and at the very back. Father had to sleep in another area reserved for male passengers only, and a young, newly married woman shares our cabin. Spirits are high and everyone is talking to everyone else finding where everyone is going in their new country. Across the passage from our cabin is a small lounge and people make themselves comfortable, talking, reading, knitting or embroidering as the ship glides out of the river and heads for the English Channel. But, all does not stay calm and placid. Sometime during the night we hit rougher seas and the seasickness starts. The young woman who shares our cabin is the first to become sick, and oh horrors, uses one of the two wash basins in the cabin. In the morning the crew have to come and dismantle all the plumbing and clean up the mess.

Since our cabin is in the bottom of the ship, no portholes can be opened so the atmosphere is not so pleasant for a little while, but we have left the cabin to get breakfast and explore the ship. During our stay with relatives, all their family came down with the flu, and the first day out at sea mother becomes ill with the flu and is bedridden for the rest of the voyage. I (Jan) am the next to get sick, and this is seasickness, and am unable to get out of bed for the next five days. Because of my age I am not allowed to have seasick pills and must suffer.

February 15th arrives and Betty celebrates her eleventh birthday on the high seas, she gets a nice new doll for her birthday.

Aveline will not go to sleep at night without her bottle. Milk is available in the childrens playroom, but Aveline is two years old and too old to get a bottle, this seems to be a problem. Ria says she will try to get the milk and she lines up at the playroom. Because of her outgoing nature she quickly befriends many of the crew and gets the milk for Aveline, who goes to sleep without any more problems. A net is stretched in front of her bunk at night to prevent her from falling out of bed.

Each evening entertainment is provided in the main lounge and one evening Ria is asked to sing with another girl and a boy.

Sometime during our eight day voyage we have a terrible storm, even father got seasick, but only once. The storm is so bad that pots and pans fly through the galley and none of the crew goes to bed that night.

Finally on February 20, we arrive in Halifax, Nova Scotia in the middle of a Canadian winter. It takes hours to get everyone and their belongings off the ship, but eventually, during the evening we find ourselves in a huge

warehouse. Father goes off to see if he can locate our crate with our furniture and belongings and mother goes to buy some fruit and other necessities for our long train ride to Ontario and I (Jan) am left to look after sisters, brother and suitcases. Father returns and says a plank is missing off our crate and the brand new tablecloth is exposed and he fears someone might pull it out of the crate, but nothing can be done about it.

Late that same evening we board our train. No luxury train this is, but an old train put into service to move immigrants across Canada. We are assigned our seats and try to settle down for the night. Some of us are curled up on the seats and others are half sitting, half hanging in their seats, but then someone comes along and shows us how the seats flip out and can be made into a sort of bed and so the younger children can at least lie down.

So we start on our second train journey. Somewhere in our luggage mother has packed a teapot, some tea, cups and sugar and boiling water can be obtained at the end of the railroad car and so we have tea and bread and jam for breakfast. There is no dining car on this train so everyone must look after their family. Most people have not thought to bring a teapot or tea and word soon spreads that mother has tea and people appear from all over the train asking for a cup of tea.

Now that we are on the train we think we can enjoy the scenery but we are wrong. The snow reaches up to the telegraph wires and only once in a while do we get a glimpse of a farm or some houses. Several times that day the train has to stop and wait for the tracks to be cleared of snow before we can carry on. At a small town, somewhere along our route, we stop and people are allowed some time to go and buy food, so father sets off to look for a store. He seems to be gone a long time and when the train blows its whistle and he is not back yet I nearly panic. However, he arrives back on time with bread, butter, corned beef, oranges and some other items, which is not bad for someone who only speaks a very few words of broken English and self serve supermarkets have not yet been heard of yet. We travel on to Montreal, Quebec and arrive there on the morning of February 22, dirty from the soot of the immigrant train and tired from lack of sleep. (Today is Huib's (Herb) sixth birthday.) We are now in one of Montreal's two passenger stations and together with another family family are put in the charge of an elderly female agent who speaks 17 languages.

Our family and the family that has joined us will be travelling together to Winchester, Ontario and we are told that we will have to go to another station to catch another train, a bus will arrive at a time given to us and so we sit back and wait until it is time to go. The time at which we are to

be picked up approaches but no one has come for us yet. Some discussions are held by the four adults as to whether they have misunderstood the time or if we have been forgotten, so once again the men go to speak to the lady at the wicket and find out that we had been forgotten. After some frantic phone calls are made to the other station and the bus which is to take us, red caps come running for us and our luggage. The two families are now running through the station hallways and shoved onto the bus which roars through the streets of Montreal. When we arrive at the station, once again porters are waiting and we are off and running again. The train is already moving as the last of our luggage is put on board and the porter receives his tip and jumps off the moving train. Everyone is exhausted and glad to find a seat on this clean passenger train, which is quite an improvement from the train we travelled on from Halifax.

After a trip of several hours, we arrive at the Winchester railway station which is a far cry from the railway stations of Holland. Someone is there to collect the other family but no one is there there to collect us and we settle down nervously to wait again. Finally Russell Miller, who is to be father's employer for the next year at least (because a contract has been signed to that effect) is there to pick us up and take us to our final destination in Williamsburg, Ontario, about another fifteen miles travelling, which to us seems a great distance. The family and luggage is stowed in the car as best as possible and once more we are off into the Canadian winter landscape.

Upon arrival at the Miller's home one of the first things that has to be done is to look for Herb's birthday present, when it is found, he is delighted with his toy motorcycle.