

Sister Josephine
Keyzer
Dutch Immigrant
Volendam
March 1951

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



Our family immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands in March of 1951. We were a family of eight children, two boys and six girls, ranging in age from one month to eleven years. I was eight and the third oldest.



—Star Photos by George Bryant
BOUND FOR CHIPPAWA, where father may work on the Ontario Hydro's new Niagara power project, are Mr. and Mrs. Nichol Keyzer and eight children. Baby Nicholette, six weeks old, held by Stewardess Louisa Schoots, is youngest. Volendam's arrival bring to 3,000 the total number of new Canadians unloaded at Halifax within the past week

My recollection of the event begins just prior to our departure from the Netherlands. Dad had obtained a long-playing record of English lessons for those of us who were old enough to learn English. The lessons did not produce any English but lots of laughter.

We left from Amsterdam pier in mid March after watching our 'container' being lifted onto the boat. The first night out at sea was heavy with fog resulting in a near collision with another ship, according to Dad. He always told us he could "almost reach over and touch the other boat."

On the ship the women and girls were on the upper decks in large rooms with bunks three high and the men and boys in the hull. During the day, we were placed in a type of day-care, a large playroom from which we were not free to come and go as someone stood on guard at the door. I believe we talked our parents into letting us out of this confinement, as this did not seem to last long. From then on we were on our own and got to know the boat rather well.

We were mostly left in the care of each other, for Mom remained in bed for the whole journey with a month-old baby and Dad, being in the hull, had a hard time keeping track of us. Besides, we were not allowed to stay in bed no matter how sea-sick we were, which left us with no alternative but to roam the boat.

Meals on board were our major concern and we soon began to anticipate them with some trepidation. This resulted from having been served 'spaghetti,' something we never had before and did not wish to see again. When I look back, maybe that was why some of us would spend our time going about the boat collecting bottles and cashing them in for cookies in the ship's store.

The first sign of coming near to land (Canada) was seeing a helicopter. This created a great stir aboard the ship as we all came running to see it fly over. The actual sighting of land, however, would not be ours to see as we arrived at Pier 21 very early in the morning. All any of us remember is finding ourselves on the train heading out of Halifax. Even my oldest sister, then eleven, did not remember our arrival nor the docking which would have been an event for us to witness. My mother's recollection of our arrival was the kindness of the "Sisters" (of Service) who were so very helpful at Pier 21. Considering she had a small baby and seven youngsters at hand, this is not surprising!

We departed from Halifax by train for Niagara Falls, Ontario. It was March 25th, I think, and it was cold. The train trip seemed endless. At night boards were pulled out from under the train seats which served as beds and we used our coats to provide covering.

Arriving in Chippewa, a small town near Niagara Falls, we moved into a very old house "in the woods". The house belonged to our sponsor who lived in the main farmhouse about three kilometers away.

School began immediately for four of us. It was a one-room schoolhouse with a male teacher. I remember being called up to the front of the class and handed a book to read to ascertain, I sensed even then, what grade I should be in. Of course, I could not read a word in English. Another girl seemingly explained where we came from and, the next thing I knew, I

was taken to the cloak room area to learn English. My first English words were window, coat hanger, and hook.

Language was an issue at home but resolved in this way. Dad wanted us to speak Dutch at home so that we would not lose the language, but Mom insisted that we speak English so that she would learn it. English became the language spoken at home.

That spring and summer we were forever on the road walking. It always seemed a long way to school and even longer to church. Happily for all of us I believe, before the next winter Dad changed jobs, thereby releasing the sponsor of any responsibility for us.

Our second home was in Stanford Center, a town some distance outside of Niagara Falls and in the opposite direction of our first home. This was a change for the better maybe because the house was larger and my father's work was more agreeable. We found lots of playmates in this farming community and experienced no language barriers.

When I reflect back on those early days, I stand in awe at the adjustment it must have been for our parents, especially for Mom who had no other supports outside our large family. In the Netherlands, Mom had assistance in the home with the children but none here, nor close kin of any kind, nor did we ever live near other Dutch people once we left our sponsor. One scene remains indelibly on my mind on first coming to Canada and that was seeing Mom crying in a rocking chair at the home of our sponsor.

Dad returned to the Netherlands for his first visit twelve years later (Mom had gone first, three years earlier). On returning he readily admitted he was still glad he came to Canada and would never consider moving back. Mom said she would not consider it because we, the children, were too "Canadianized".

What stood out about our new country, Canada, in those early years was its incomprehensible vastness and the trees, the endless trees. We also enjoyed the Niagara Falls and the surrounding area as we often went there for picnics. We even swam in places that today are heavily signed with RESTRICTED AREA. For us then, it was available, accessible, and open.

Since our arrival in Ontario in March of 1951, the ninth child was born in 1952, the only Canadian child by birth. In this year of 2000, we are eight children. An older brother died of cancer in the Fall of 1990 and Dad died in the Spring of 1991. All but two of the children continue to live in Ontario. One sister is married in Manitoba and myself, a member

of the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Martha, live in Antigonish,
Nova Scotia.