

John Vanderlaan
Dutch Immigrant
Veendam
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On May 23rd 1930, I was born in a small village in the



northern part of The Netherlands. At the time of my birth I had 3 siblings. A brother and 2 sisters. At later dates 2 more brothers were born. When 6 years old, I went to elementary school and in 1942 went to high school in the provincial capital, Groningen. The high school was about 25 km from our home, making it necessary to commute by regular passenger bus. Around 1943 or 1944 the Allied forces had achieved supremacy in the air. Often their planes ranged the sky looking for targets of opportunity, which would include any traffic on the roads. Because of the danger of being shot at on my way to and from school, my parents thought it best at that time to take me out of high school. I went to work on a farm till the end of the war in May 1945. After the war I went back to high school and completed my formal education in June 1952.

With The Netherlands still recovering from World War 2 and being involved in a colonial war in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, opportunities in The Netherlands were few and restricted. In the post war years there were many rules and regulations dealing with war recovery programs. To ease the burden and speed up this recovery, the Dutch government started to actively promote emigration. Countries preferred by many emigrants were Canada, the U.S.A., New Zealand and South Africa.

I had several reasons



for choosing Canada as my future country of residence, rather than one of the other countries mentioned above.

Most of The Netherlands was liberated by the Canadian army. This left a great feeling of gratitude with the Dutch population. Also most soldiers, if not all, had spoken highly of their homeland as a land of opportunity !

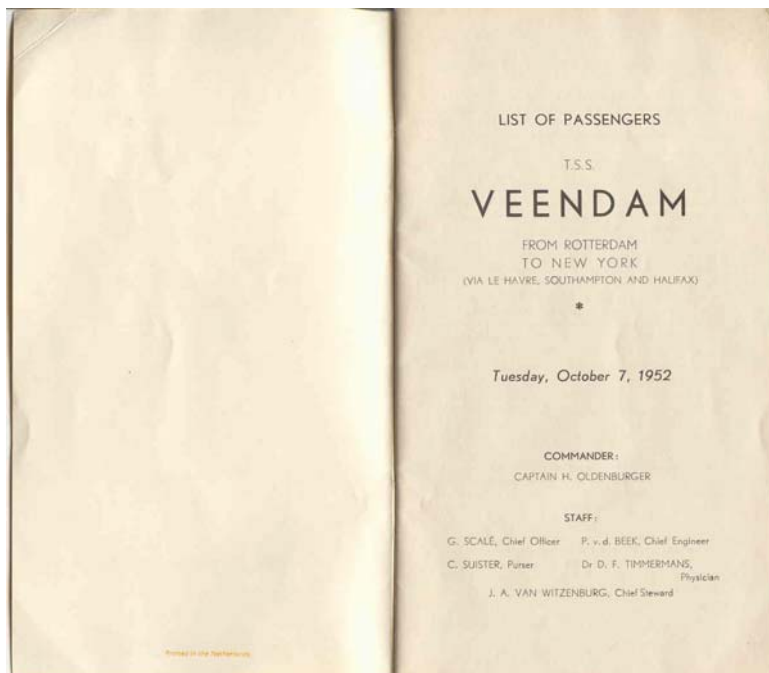
In 1951 my younger brother Bert had emigrated to Canada to find a future in farming, an occupation which offered preferential treatment to would be immigrants.

Entry from the Netherlands into Canada was less restrictive than into the U.S. To facilitate my acceptance to Canada, I worked on a farm from July to October. The Canadian government had a medical office in The Hague, where all prospective immigrants had to have a physical check-up and proof of having successfully undergone a smallpox vaccination. (I can still remember the Canadian doctor feeling for calluses in my hands to verify my farmer status)

A desire for adventure.

A friend of mine was in Canada at that time, on a half year visitors visa, to visit a brother and his wife, who had emigrated a few years earlier.

On October 7th 1952 my father brought me to Rotterdam. Here I boarded the Holland America Line's passenger ship VEENDAM under Commander Captain H.Oldenburger. We stopped in Southampton and in Le Havre, to take on additional passengers. In Southampton, while watching the passengers board, I recognized one of the ship's officers. He was born in Rotterdam and came as a 13 or 14 year old boy to our village, to escape the hunger situation in the big cities. After the war we saw little of each other.



Meeting again we had a chance to get reacquainted. Because of him, I had the opportunity to see many areas of the ship, including areas which were off limit to regular passengers. The Atlantic crossing took 10 days. I don't remember all that much about it, except that we had a lot of stormy weather and that many people were seasick

As we came within sight of land there was much excitement. Also, stewards were running around to ensure that the people they had looked after during the crossing, were aware of the custom of tipping. Many of the immigrants had never traveled any distance before and had little concept of tipping or maybe they needed some prompting.

At the time of my disembarkation, all my worldly possessions consisted of a duffel bag full of clothing and study books. In addition I had a \$37.50 bank draft and \$ 10.00 cash. The amount was small, because of a tight money policy in the Netherlands, which permitted me to take out only 150 guilders. The exchange rate at that time was 4 to 1. The train ticket to Hamilton Ontario had been prepaid.

What I remember most of Pier 21, is that it was a huge, barn like structure. Here all my documents were checked and stamped. Before boarding the train, we all had to step into a tray with some kind of disinfectant, possibly to guard against the spread of hoof and mouth disease.

The train I was on seemed run down and old, and had hard, wooden seats. The train whistle had a unique sound, which stayed with me and even today, after more than 50 years, when I hear it, it some times brings back old memories.

Once we left Halifax, the countryside looked empty, in comparison to what I was used to in The Netherlands. A farm here and there and once in a while a small village. For the rest miles of forests. It did not take long to realize that Canada was a big country. Although I knew this before I left, to experience it, was quite different. Used to train rides of a few hours, I now had the unusual experience of sitting in a train for days. In Québec City and Montreal the train stopped long enough to buy some necessities.

In Hamilton, I was picked up by my friend's brother. We drove to his place in Fruitland. Here I also met my brother Bert. We had not seen each other for well over a year. I soon found out that several weeks before my arrival, he had been involved in a car accident near Sarnia. His car was a write off. He was charged and had to pay damages, which left him more or less broke.

Before leaving The Netherlands I knew that my sponsor did not have work for me and that I would be on my own. To find work, Bert and I took the bus from Fruitland to Hamilton, to go to the unemployment office there. We were told that our chances of finding work in the Hamilton area, at that time of year, were practically non-existent. According to the employment officer, there should be plenty of work in Northern Ontario, in either the gold or nickel mines or in the lumber industry. He recommended that we head North.

Being short on funds, we walked from downtown Hamilton back to Fruitland. Along the way we stopped for a 10 cent cup of coffee. The juke box played "Indian Love Call", a song which after all these years still has a special meaning for me.

The next day we took the train to Sudbury, where we arrived early the following morning. We had a busy day ahead.



Our first step was to find a place to stay. For the first night we booked into a small motel and then went to the unemployment office. Armed with the information we received, we went from there to a lumber company and then on to the International Nickel Company (INCO). We filled out an application at both places. After that, we looked for longer term lodgings and found a very cheap boarding house, where for \$7.00 we rented a room for a week. Our room had 2 single beds, a chair and a table. We continued to look for work the following days, applying at several other companies. Because we did not have a mailing address or a telephone, we would check back with the companies where we had applied for work. This entailed a lot of walking.

While looking for work we came upon a Finish restaurant, where for 10 cents we could buy a bowl of soup with two slices of dry bread. We went to this restaurant daily for soup and bread, for breakfast, for lunch and for dinner. By now we were down to our last few dollars.

Within a few days we received promising news from the International Nickel Company. We both had to come in for a medical examination. We passed and were given instructions for when and where to report for work. If it had not been for my high school English, I don't think I would have gotten the job. After 1½ years in Canada, Bert had no difficulty in this respect.

Although we now had a job, we still had to work for our first pay. Then it would take the company a number of days to prepare a pay cheque. At this stage we were really out of money and considered pawning some of our things. Before it came that far however, we were fortunate in meeting another Dutchman, who was boarding with a Dutch family. He introduced us to them and they took us in. They told us that we could pay when we had the money.

We both started working in the Creighton mines, close to Sudbury. Bert in mine #1 and I in mine #2. Not only that, we also had different shifts and starting times. I don't think that our parent expected us to become miners. Our philosophy however was to find work first, any kind, earn and save some money, and then look for better opportunities.

Before we were allowed to work, we first spent 1 or 2 days learning all about mine safety. After about 4 or 5 weeks I went to an underground school to learn about drilling and blasting, but I never worked on my own in this occupation.

Most of my time was spent at the 52 level (5200 ft.) About 1/2 km from the main shaft, another shaft went down to the 68 level (6800 ft.) There is a limit on how far a cage or elevator can go down, because eventually the weight of the cable itself starts to play a limiting role. The 52 level were I worked most of my time, was a very busy place, with railway traffic and foot traffic, necessitating the use of underground traffic lights.! I also worked briefly as far down as 6800 ft.

Sudbury in the winter can be a cold place for a Dutchman fresh off the boat. When it is 5.30 in the morning and you are waiting for your ride, temperatures of minus 40 degrees Celsius are quite an experience for someone who is used to a more moderate sea climate.

In March of 1953 Bert left for Hamilton. By mid May I had saved enough money to see me through a period of unemployment in southern Ontario. Mining was not for me. On a Saturday afternoon I left Sudbury by Greyhound bus.

On arrival in Hamilton the following day, I contacted my brother in Fruitland and on Monday morning went with him to his place of work. He worked for a construction company which, prior to the building of a sub-division, was building sewer tunnels about 20 to 30 ft. down in the rocky ground around Hamilton. The on-site supervisor was busy when we arrived and indicated that he would see me later. When he had time, he asked for my qualifications. I showed my mining papers and told him about my work at INCO. After some thought he said: "OK, you have a job". When I asked when to start, he said: "Now or not at all". Although

not dressed for construction work, I started then and there, in the process ruining a good outfit, shoes, pants and shirt. But I had work ! In this job I worked until October of 1953.

In Hamilton I found room and board with the family J. Voortman. At this time their sons Bill and Harry, in their late teens or early twenties, were starting their own business in what is now known as “Voortman Cookies Ltd.”. One of their brothers was in real estate and through him I bought a house on Canada Street. Low down payment and easy terms.

In the summer of 1953, my oldest sister came to Canada to marry her Dutch fiancé, Henk van Harten. He had 7 sisters and 3 brothers and had emigrated with his family in 1948. In 1952 he went on a trip to The Netherlands and renewed an old friendship with my sister. This led to an engagement in The Netherlands and marriage in 1954. The first Sunday after her arrival, Bert and I went to see her at her fiancé’s place in Clarkson, where we met his whole family.



Before long one of Henk’s sisters, by the name of Margo, and I were going steady and became engaged in November 1954. We married in September 1955.

Three years later, in 1958, after a compulsory waiting period of 5 years, I became a Canadian citizen. My wife and I are both proud to be Canadians.

When I became unemployed in October 1953, one of Henk’s brothers mentioned that the company for which he worked, was building a new plant in Clarkson, Ontario. Many jobs in those days came by word of mouth, through friends and friends of friends. I applied for a job and was hired as a factory worker by Diversey Canada Limited, a manufacturing company of industrial cleaning compounds. It was shift work, with a starting rate of \$ 1.15 per hour.

Over the years my responsibilities changed and increased. It went from shift boss to plant manager. In 1964, I went to France for 3 ½ months to assist with the start-up of a new plant. Not long thereafter I was promoted to purchasing manager. Eventually I became Plants and Materials Manager for all of Canada. In this capacity my duties covered full responsibility for our plants in Dartmouth, Montreal, Mississauga, Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver. It included manufacturing, warehousing, inventory control, and transportation. Our fleet consisted of tank trucks, tractor trailers and straight delivery trucks. In addition, this function covered full responsibility for the purchase of all raw materials, containers, etc. including office supplies. I worked for Diversey for 37½ years and retired in 1990 at age 60.

Around the time of my retirement, my wife Margo and I bought a motor home and have traveled extensively across North America. We have truly seen and experienced much beauty.

Margo and I have now been married for over 47 years and have been blessed with 5 children. Early on in our marriage we decided to speak English at home, with the consequence that our children speak little or no



Dutch, although all five have visited The Netherlands. In hindsight, we wish that we had taught them our mother tongue.

We also have 15 grandchildren. Three of our children married spouses whose parents were born in The Netherlands. Our oldest daughter married a Canadian and our youngest son married an American girl and has been living in the United States for the past 20 years. We presently live in Brampton, Ontario in a retirement complex by the name of Holland Christian Homes.

In summary, I want to say that Canada has been a good country for us. We love it here and have had no regrets for immigrating into this great country. We have been richly blessed.

A footnote regarding my family:

My mother died in 1941, when I was eleven years old. My father remarried in 1943. As mentioned before, Bert came to Canada in 1951, I came in 1952, my oldest sister came in 1953, my other sister and her husband and 2 children emigrated in 1954 and my youngest brother came in 1957. In 1975, my oldest sibling and his wife and 3 adult children, also came. Two of their sons had already emigrated a few years earlier. My second mother died in 1975. She was a good mother and we were all able to fly home to spend time with her before she passed away. The next year, in 1976, my 76 year old father also emigrated. (Now that I am older I have often thought how painful it must have been for my parents to see us leave, one by one. In particular in the early years when, at the time of departure, the thought was in every ones mind that most likely we would not meet again). Before leaving The Netherlands, Dad had made it quite clear that, although he loved us dearly, he did not want to live-in with one of us. He was determined to keep his independence. When we helped him to open his packing crate (kist), one of the first things that came out was his trusted bike and, against our advice, he used it regularly. He passed away in 1983. My older sister died in 1995, my oldest brother also died in 1995 and my oldest sister passed away in 1997, leaving me as the oldest.

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