



MY LIFE, THE WAY IT WENT

Jan Verkley 2009

On June 28, 1931, a most important event took place. I was born. I had a whole life ahead of me and I was determined to have some fun. I soon found out that being the youngest in the family, I had to be a little bigger, older and wiser to deal with all the obstacles life would put in my way. I was born in Alphen aan den Rijn, in the Netherlands. My father was a dairy farmer, on good grass land. It produced excellent Gouda cheese, made by my mother. My siblings, Hannie, Piet, Corrie, Caecilia and Coop gave me a rich environment in which I could develop and be happy. We had after all the best parents one could hope for, who guided us according the established values of the times.

In 1951, just after I entered the army, my father died. This was for me very traumatic. At 62, he was too young. He would have liked to live longer, yet he accepted his death. A few weeks before he died of cancer, he played the organ in the church for the last time. He knew it. It also happened to be our parents 37th wedding anniversary. After mass, he played and played, improvising with feelings and bravura, he couldn't stop. My brother Coop and I stood behind him, listening. Finally, his swan song ended, he slowly and deliberately switched off the organ, closed the cover, slid of the bench and that was the end. He just walked away, down the spiral staircase. A life's chapter was closed. No words were spoken, our eyes wet.

Mother was not a strong person physically, but her will and dedication were formidable. As always, sitting in her chair, knitting or darning socks, she would look out through the window to the road, pressing her glasses closer to her eyes. This helped us during the war to warn us of approaching inspectors and gave us some time to hide incriminating items. I never argued with



Brentano's Yvervucht, The place were I was born.

her, you knew that she was always right. When I read her life story, which she wrote after she was 80 years old, I learned so much about her. Her religious beliefs formed the foundation of her actions. I am sure, she never spoke a cross word or did anything knowingly wrong. An aneurism stopped her at 92 years of age. We all knew about the aneurism, but she was not told. We were waiting for it, and were prepared, but when it happened, something hit me hard. Yes, she was old and died without distress, but I felt the loss of the mother I had left 40 years ago. I had not expected this reaction, but it did. I went home for the funeral, and was glad to be there. I played the organ during the funeral mass. That felt good.

Hannie (sounds like honey), was the practical one. Could work fast and always knew what to do to get herself out of a sticky situation. She married later in life, went to Canada, at the same time Miep and I did, and became a farmer's wife. She played the organ in her church, and for a

while sold encyclopedias door to door. She was the business type. Sadly she lost her memory and died at 87 years of age in Strathroy.

Piet, (Peter) was never home when I was. After Aggie (agricultural) school he worked in the N.E. Polder and various other places. He went to Canada in 1947 and came back a year later to marry Geziena who, over time, bore him 11 children. He was a good singer and directed the choir in Strathroy for many years. The farm in Strathroy became bigger and bigger but the problem with high interest taxed his spirit to the limit. He survived, again in good spirits. Later, the boys took over. Peter retired and used his basement to make small tables and boxes decorated with wood-inlay depicting the most intricate designs. He died in 2007. At 89, he was at that time the oldest of all the living relatives.

Corrie was the cook during the war, when the table was long and the eaters were many. She made a different dessert every Sunday; an excellent cook. Hand stitching and doll making were her specialties. She was a nurse for many years (see later) and married Toine when she was 43 years old. She now lives in Amersfoort, still in good health. She used to babysit me when I was small, and we formed a special bond. It's still there.

Caecilia worked hard and was always ready for a good laugh. She accepted life as it came and could look at the bright side. During the war she was the one to smuggle meat or cheese to Amsterdam, where she worked during the later war years. She also had to pick up the ration cards and haggled to get more. After the war she married Fons Jansen, who became a well known cabaret artist. I also have a strong bond with her. She still lives in Hilversum and will make it to her 100th birthday.

Coop, (Jacobus), was the brother I grew up with. We always were together. We were close. He was a Suideest, me, a Verkleij. Once, we drove a cart to a field. He had some candies but wouldn't give me any, (jokingly). Shortly after that the horse kicked him and he broke his arm. I got him back on the cart, and while driving him home took the candies out of his pocket. He didn't get any! We joked about that many times. When I called him from Canada, we would always talk nonsense for a few minutes, before getting to the point. He was a good farmer, and had to take over the reins at home at the age of 23, after our father died. The farm made good Gouda cheese and flourished under his guidance. He died at 77 years of age. I miss him.

During the dirty thirties my parents lost half of the farm, and only 53 acres were left. Money was scarce and the war years of 1940 - 1945 created fear and tension in our daily lives. It was very difficult for my parents to run a farm during the war, and deal with so many hungry people, who came to our farm begging for food. It was Corrie's job to answer the door and send them away empty handed. That was very hard on her. We could do only so much without causing problems with the Government inspectors, who we often had to bribe with butter. They were hungry too! Many young men were let in, to hide from the aggressor, and visitors, who always arrived just before mealtime, had to be fed. My Parents took great personal risks, but kept our family together. We knew that if the authorities, who always entered unannounced, found out about the clandestine operations, the outcome would be disastrous. To their credit, my parents never overcharged the hungry people.

For ourselves, we had milk, butter, cheese and meat and bartered for grain, but other items, like sugar and spices, toothpaste and soap, were not easy to find. Hydro was on for a few hours per day and we were allotted only so many Kilowatts per month, but I learned to bypass the meter or run it backwards. For a long time, in the living room, we used a 6 volt car battery to power one single headlight bulb, and had 10 or 12 people around the table. You learned to make do.

Everything was rationed, but Caecilia always managed to pilfer some extra cards from the distribution office by knowing who to talk to and using her pleasant personality. The household managed to keep going. We all did our part. The hiders were put to work on the farm and in the household as well. Butter had to be churned by hand, potatoes peeled, etc.

One day, we received a warning that the Germans would come to our neighbourhood to search for persons in hiding. Our "hiders" dove into an empty old well, 6 ft diameter 6 ft deep and with a small lid in the top, level with the ground. I was 13, no need to hide yet. Just as the searchers arrived I noticed that the boys had started smoking. I could see the smoke rising up through the lid. I walked over the lid towards the soldier who was standing 40 ft away. He turned around and left. I don't think my action did anything but when the "all clear" sign came, there was hell to pay by the boys.

I already was interested in airplanes, and watched as hundreds or a thousand bombers came over on their way to Germany. We saw "air shows" every day. It was a sight, but I realized that many innocent people had to suffer the consequences of Hitler's ideologies. Fighter planes would strafe anything that moved on wheels. Strange now, to think that there was no civilian traffic on the road besides bikes, which were then often confiscated by soldiers for their own use. V-2 rockets went up 20 km away from us and their contrail would be visible for a long time. Several times, we had soldiers quartered in the house. They looked after their horses in the barn. They were farm boys and hated the war like we did. When one of our horses got stuck in a ditch, about 20 soldiers, under the direction of a (fluent Dutch speaking) officer, pulled the horse out in a professional manner. We just looked while they did all the work. One evening, while a birthday party was underway, our drunk guest came in and related his experiences he suffered on the East front in Russia. He was an older and decent man. Although we never surrendered our radio, which was hidden, they wanted to know how the war was going as we heard the news from a Dutch newscast from England.

We survived, but everybody suffered some loss during those years. My high schooling was conducted in a dozen different locations in the village, sometimes only one day a week, at a teachers residence, so my study suffered a lot. I had the brains, they told me, but I was too distracted, and the results were rather poor. Farm work did not appeal to me: living with animals was nice, but working with animals also demanded hard shitty work at difficult hours, enduring much suffering from the elements. Doing that seven days of the week just did not appeal to me.

But I was a shy type, allowing myself to be led by circumstances. Work had to be done, and I would not refuse.

One day, I admitted to my mother that I wanted to fly, when she asked me what I wanted to do in later life. The quick answer was, "you going all over the world with those stewardesses? You better become a farmer". I enrolled in the Agricultural school in Voorhout, where I studied for 2

years. We had to work very hard to cram all that information into our cranial cavities while there was a tendency to fall asleep in the early afternoon, as farmers normally do. I graduated, made many friends and had a lot of fun.

1950. It was not long after, when the Queen called me to enter the army as an infantry soldier. That was a different life and I wondered what would happen. After two months I got a visit from a traveling Officer who wanted me to go for Officers' training. I did not want to serve an extra 6 months, so I declined. After all, the army was not a very popular place to be, maybe because it was conscripted. A few weeks later I was called to go to the Under Officers' School;

this time declining was no option. Six months extra again. I was stationed in the south of Holland. It was all infantry, with a small section where one could become a driving instructor. That is where I ended up because I already had a civilian license, which was a rarity in those days, after the war, and I was a farm boy, used to bigger wagons and machinery, and was well prepared for this job. What luck! Every day driving, and 2 hours classroom for mechanics. Of course, we had



My personal bike

to do some infantry as well, but all in all, we had a good time. I have fired a pistol, bazooka, machine gun, 50 mm aircraft gun, piat, whatever came along and went kaboom. After getting my 4 licenses for night and all-terrain driving, sand dunes and towing, I went to Arnhem to teach. I would take 3 pupils in the morning and drive all over Holland. Later we were included in a newly formed division where I ended up in the top group where the General and other big brass resides, and got the title of Transport Officer. (Yeah, sergeant first class, that's all). I was in charge of about 60 vehicles and 80 drivers, and had to issue permits for trucks and drivers to be at designated times and places. It worked like a car rental system.

Much of my time was spent in my office, keeping me very busy. The last days of my army life were spent in the infamous flood of 1953. There was utter chaos and many lives were lost. I saw more than enough misery while driving around. It was a sad sight, to see barns full with dead cows, and animals wandering around in search of food in the salt water. After that, we went home for good, although I had to work an extra week to clear out my office. Army life was good for me because I was always busy and did not suffer from boredom. I learned a lot.

1952 While still in the army, something happened which changed my life. My sister Corrie, who had just graduated as a nurse, had invited two of her nurses friends to our farm. I was given the task of going to the bus stop a km away. I asked her how they looked like. She just smiled, so I fired up the old 1933 Chevy and went. On the way back, I looked more in the rearview mirror than on the road. By evening my mind was made up. I believe she knew it too. It took still another 2 months before we met again, because of the above mentioned flood, which kept me away from home, and her! She now sits beside me, still beautiful, and that after 54 years together.

1953. I went to work at the crop farm of my uncle in the Haarlemmermeer, near Haarlem. Uncle Cor and Aunt Marie treated me like one of their own. I was actually killing time because plans were made to emigrate to Canada. I also worked at a flour mill, mixing feed for the various farm animals. One day I had to help to unload a boatload of grain. This was done by hand. Someone would hold the bag and five shovels would fill it. It was then hoisted up and weighed. When I came home on the second day, I started my prayer before the meal as, 1-2-3-4-5. Still, today, when I fill the tea kettle under the tap, I count to 5. This way I always have the right amount. This is science at its best.

1954. A custom worker, who had two little tractors, (big in those days), hired me to spread manure at farms, or mow grass for haying. Easy work, but some farmers complained about those big tires in their fields, and scaring the cows with all that noise. I did my best, but the bigger problem was the constant rain, every day of that summer. In this part of Holland, the land is flat, the fields divided by ditches. In one region the ditches are wider than the fields, with no connecting dams. My tractor had to be moved from one field to another by boat. At one point, there was a small dip in a very wet field causing the tractor to go through the sod and sink six inches. It had to be rescued by hand power and long poles. And more rain fell.

Another aspect of my life concerned music. The whole family was musical; all my Verkleij relatives are musical. For every celebration or anniversary, my father would compose a cantata, (and gave us 10 minutes to learn it), or someone would play an instrument or sing. We made our own entertainment. My father Jan was a real musicus. He could play the piano well, (with short stubby fingers), sight-read music fast, and played the organ in our Catholic church for 40 years. The congregation was inspired and moved by his music. Improvising was his forte, he just played according to his mood. He was a Master musician. After the service, many people waited until he was finished playing. During the war years, (see above), musicians would come over to our farm to play their instrument while my father played the piano. Of course, the musicians were hungry too which was one of the reasons. The other one was that one could not perform in public unless they were registered in the so-called "German Culture Chamber" which nobody wanted of course. We heard performances on violin, cello, flute, or voice, and endless conversations about music. All family parties and anniversaries were full of music, performed by whoever could play.



A Wonderful Instrument

As a young boy I sang in a choir, called "Schola Cantorum", we sang the Gregorian chants during the Sunday high mass, standing next to the altar, while another choir sang the harmonized music, high up in the loft, at the back of the church, where the organ was. It was a big church, like many in Europe. When I was a bit older, I went upstairs and tried to play the organ. Not easy. That thing was big and could be noisy. I loved to

accompany the faithful. During the last two years before I moved to Canada I was one of the

official organists there. Here in Canada, I have played in many local churches, but the little electronic organs did not appeal to me. I still miss the real organs. On the first Sunday in Canada, still being at Peter's house since we arrived, I played organ in their church. I found out they were waiting for me! The Latin rights were similar all over the world at that time. One Sunday, I was a bit late. That is not so good, but worse, none of the choir members were there either. I was alone, and the priest had already intoned the "Asperges me". I started the organ and sang, normally no problem, but my mind went blank and I could not remember a word, and that after singing and playing it for many years. I just sang some vowels and made noises and while doing that, help finally arrived. Peter and three more choir members. Great. They realized my predicament and started laughing while poor me struggled to keep the whole Catholic religion from disintegrating. Wow, similar incidents happen in many churches, and nobody noticed this one.

1955. We married on the 14th of April in Bovenkerk, in a big beautiful church, three priests at the altar, full choir and organ, the works, just to make sure this was going to last. It did! This was the best deal of my life. I gave myself away but got more in return and never regretted it. We had our honeymoon in the houseboat of my sister Caecilia and husband Fons Jansen: and the future was ours. This does not mean that it was easy because you don't emigrate on a monthly basis. First the preparations, and then the last good byes at the airport. This was painful and FINAL!! Coming back to see your family again was a rarity. On this momentous evening we walked to a KLM DC7-C and went to where? A problem developed to necessitate a stay over in Ireland. The next morning we crossed the ocean, wave after wave. Miep felt the distance getting bigger, hour after hour. At last we saw the icebergs of Newfoundland, and the isolated villages, without connecting roads. We landed in Gander where we had to pass through customs. I proudly presented my large stack of official immigration papers from the Dutch government, but the officer just pointed to a garbage can and said, "Welcome to Canada". That was it?! Just like that? From there we flew to Montreal, where we arrived late in the evening. The 800 km train trip the next day was beautiful, showing us much of the country. Late that evening we arrived in London. One must not forget that this was not just a holiday trip. We left Holland behind us.... for good ! For Miep in particular, this was hard and it made me wonder if I did the right thing.

We arrived at my brother Pete and Gezina's place near Strathroy, Ontario. I soon found work on a farm near Mount Brydges. The first morning there, the farmer held up a pail and said, "This is a pail", then showed me the whole herd of 4 cows. I planted myself under the first one and started to milk. Soon, the cow looked back at me, then I noticed that Don was also looking from behind the cow he was milking. So what, I have a good old-fashioned milking diploma. I noticed that my boss milked one front and one back teat at the same time, with little squirts, while I had a good layer of foam in my pail. He later confessed that he was impressed. He gave me some good English lessons and told me often not to work too hard. The first few days, I had to split wood. During the morning the farmer's wife, Doris, would come by and talk to me, on her



The Big Bird, for us a final step.

way to gather the eggs in the chicken house. She would carry the little pail on the crook of her arm, the other arm crossed as well. Fine. This went on for a few days until Miep was invited to come along for an afternoon to get acquainted with the farmers wife. Driving home that evening Miep mentioned that one arm had nothing below the elbow: I had not noticed that. She was born that way. Tying on an apron was something to behold. No problem. Sewing, no problem etc. Don and Doris were very nice and helped us a lot. Don died several years ago but we still have contact with Doris who is now 88 years old.

We moved into an old house nearby, in Longwood, which had been empty for 15 years. No hydro, no phone, no water, no toilet, no radio; and all that for \$ 20 per month rent. That seems very little, but I only made \$ 80.- per month. More about that house later.

First I needed a car. Pete took us to a car lot and a deal was made for \$ 300,-. No haggling, that's not done in Canada, Pete said. Then I needed a license. He took us to a small office, and for 2 dollars I got my permit and a book. Pete put the book in his pocket, and we went to the Drivers' Examiner, who was the local garage man. He asked a lot of questions; that's fine if you understand English. I knew some from high school, but oh man! "When do you dim your headlights when another car approaches?" I looked at Pete, who, behind his back, showed three fingers, so I answered, "3 miles". "No!, read the book !!!" More questions which I half understood and missed the right answers for. He indicated that we were going for a ride. After all, he did not make money by sending me away. We drove in Pete's '34 Dodge, minus part of the floor. At some point the Examiner indicated to me to turn around. I saw a little laneway, and backed in there. He then started with a long question. I was lost. I thought about my brother Coop, laughing if he could see me now. The long question stopped and I answered with a loud "Yes". "No"! was his reply, and he started all over, so now I triumphantly answered "No". That was wrong again because he had reversed the question. Then he said that in Holland you do this too. Do what? I went on the road and then I understood. I told him "Back in, go out, see cars" Good, he said. He was happy now. We arrived at an intersection where five roads come together. I stopped at the stop sign, 50 ft. before. He asked me why I stopped. I pointed to the stop sign. "No" he said "you cannot see the traffic". I thought that's what he meant. I drove on, but in the middle of the intersection he yelled to stop. I said "No, I go", and I did. He grumbled something but then the car grumbled as well and gave up the ghost. No fuel and no working fuel gauge. I deftly parked this contraption along the sidewalk. Now my friend was really upset. He got out of the car, slammed the door shut, and lectured me about Jesus Christ and Hell and some more. I just followed him 10 feet behind. The garage was around the corner where Pete and Miep were waiting on the sidewalk. Pete said, "Jan had an accident", Miep said, "no, he is a truck driving instructor". Pete went inside to hear the news. He came out after 2 minutes and told me he was sorry, because after 5 o'clock the office is closed and I had to wait 'till the next morning to pick up my license. Wow, how come? The man told Pete that I was the best driver he ever had to test, but my English was lousy. I still drive and my English still sounds bad. My high school English consisted of grammar lessons to learn the difference between much and many, but no conversation lessons ! I am sorry now that I, at a later date, did not go back to that garage man to talk to him.

Back to the house in Longwood.

We started "fixing" which meant repairing the ceiling, and a hole in the kitchen floor, replacing 35 little window panes, leaving one open for the swallow parents to feed their young, get a portable toilet, re-hang the entrance door, build wooden steps to enter the house, find a woodstove, find wood, buy cheap paint, wall paper, chase away the groundhogs, fetch water from the neighbours who lived 500 feet across the road, and borrow a bed and 4 chairs: two to sit on, two as table. Miep prepared meals on a single flame kerosene contraption and I loved it and her too and we lived like that for six weeks. Finally our crate arrived from Holland, which came by boat and then by train from Halifax. The house was now more or less livable, but the summers were too hot, and the winters very cold.

In that first winter I worked for a tobacco farmer for a few weeks, sorting leaves. One day, a snowstorm started. A little car problem delayed my homecoming by half an hour. As I drove in the dark through blinding snow I vaguely saw someone move beside the country road, somebody with a shovel. I stopped, and there was Miep, ready to find me somewhere and dig me out. God, I could have missed her and she surely would have been frozen.

In June of 1956, when Miep was 26 weeks into her pregnancy, she found herself in labour. I drove her to the hospital, where I was sent to the waiting room, while Miep had to fend off those old fashioned practices before giving birth to two little boys. Gabriel was the first one at three pounds, but his twin brother did not survive, while this so-called doctor complained about the heat and was generally not up to the task. Miep asked for a cup of water and baptized Joseph. It was a deeply traumatic event for Miep, who, in Holland, helped deliver many babies without the use of anesthetics.

The following evening, a priest directed me to where the funeral home was. I went inside to ask for my child, whom Miep had given the name Joseph. I set the little box in the car, opened it and kissed his little head before we drove to the cemetery. I dug a small grave in the unconsecrated part, in the far corner, and buried my baby. The priest also hated the heat, and prattled on and on, almost inspiring me to hit him over the head with my shovel. Damn it! I was 24 years old, and alone in a strange country, in the twilight of the evening, burying my own son. This traumatic event still haunts me. It has changed my opinion forever on a few subjects! We were alone.....Joseph and I.

The good nurses did all they could to look after Gabriel and we took him home after 45 days, when he weighed almost five pounds.

One morning during the next winter, we woke up after a fitful sleep; with the window open of course, being Dutch; and I stepped out of my bed into 10 cm of snow. Everything was covered



Longwood, a beginning.

in white, except around our faces. I started a fire in the woodstove as usual, and made sure the window stayed closed. (but not for long.)

Every evening I filled the little stove with wood, and hoped it would last the night. One morning we noticed that a candle, 8 feet away, standing on the piano across the room, had melted. It was a round ball, now it was flat and had dripped. That scared us. One foot behind the stove was the wallpaper but that did not catch fire? If a fire had started, we could not have saved Gabriel who slept in a little room on the other side past the stove, and we all would likely have died through smoke inhalation.

We realized that this was not going to work, so I built a brand new house in Delaware, closer to London. I did not know how to do that but you look and you ask and it rose out of the ground. In addition I dug a 25 ft. deep well, by hand. In those days I worked along the railroad; awful work, with Ukrainians and Polish people. I was the only one who could read and write English, and was not colour blind, so I got the job, during the summer, of being in the Richmond street tower to direct the trains coming in and out of London.

This shift work gave me extra time to work on our house. One evening in the fall the central furnace was installed and started. No ductwork yet but I lifted a sheet of plywood flooring above the furnace, and a blast of hot air heated the place in no time. The house was just plastered and the kitchen sink, with real taps, stood on four pieces of wood, the counter and cupboards had to be built yet. Outside there was a cold winter storm brewing, and I decided to get Miep and the two boys plus a mattress and move in. When I came home later that night, the kitchen looked like a war zone, with boxes all over the kitchen floor, filled with dishes and clothes. Miep was going to move, was the message I got. Well, we waited 'till the next morning, borrowed the farmer's pickup truck and we went into our new, half finished, warm palace. Bingo!! The next day Miep's brother Jan, who lived in Halifax, had decided to drive the 2000 km, to visit us. He stayed all winter, and since I was then unemployed, we worked together to finish the job. The cost of the whole project: \$ 8153.67 plus my own labour. I got a \$ 4000.- mortgage from the Credit Union, but had to wait 3 weeks before the bank could scrape that amount together. Payments were \$ 75.- per month, and a heavy load for me. The year was 1958.

(A few years ago, the house sold for \$ 225.000.- The Village is now London's bedroom. That's why).

To help me with the complicated roof trusses, a relative who did renovations in London, helped me and later hired me to work for him. I enjoyed this type of work and became a Jack of all Trades. After 3 years, in 1961, just after taking Miep and children Gabriel, Wilfred and Jacqueline on a trip to Holland, I started out on my own. We went with the first charter flight in the world, organized by our Credit Union in London. A heavy fog hung over the Amsterdam airport, so we landed, after 14 long hours, in Germany, and much later, went through that



Fruit of our labour. Delaware.

foggy night by bus to Holland. At one point, a flashlight was used to read the direction from a Highway traffic sign. We stayed three weeks in Holland. It was a good visit.

1961. Back home, I started trimming new houses, hanging doors, baseboard trim etc. Soon I hired a helper and we both worked hard. Later I did apartment buildings, doing all the kitchens and vanities. The last one was the 10 story Jack Tar building in King street in London. I needed 380 sheets of plywood plus a few hundred more of a lighter grade to build the 180 kitchens. Those orders were unheard of in the early sixties. Things went great until the builder went broke.

1965. By now, I had enough of the construction trade and rented a small shop to start wood working, doing whatever needed to be done. It was a slow start, but luck got me a job to supply union carpenters, at \$ 3.50 per hour, and labourers, to build shelves in a Woolco store in London on a cost-plus basis. That made good money, and helped me to buy a larger building in Lambeth, where, in time, we supplied all the cabinetry for new schools. That went fine until they stopped building schools. Slowly my work went from custom work to manufacturing. I was asked to build wooden buckets by Simpson Sears, who put them in their catalogue. That lasted two years, but by then we already sold them to flower shops everywhere. Learning to sell is another chapter, but feeding your family motivates you. I managed to built 50.000 of them over the next 10 years or so. It was a craft, where I had to invent machines, worked too hard, ate a lot of dust and still did not make a lot of money. As a matter of fact, I almost went broke.

Life in Delaware was somewhat normal. Get up in the morning, have breakfast, go to work, etc etc. Sunday morning was more hectic. Children and parents had to be dressed up to go to church. It was my job to play the organ and for a while I was also the choir director. The choir did well, singing harmonized masses, still according to the Latin Rights. It then became time to include the parishioners in singing those parts which were sung every Sunday. I went to the front of the church and directed the congregation, dressed up in cassock and that long white dress, of which I forget the name. The results were good, the singing I mean, provided I knew when to indicate to the congregation to stand up. Good thing I knew the ritual of the mass, but had to watch and listen to the priest to know when he was ready to intone something. Later, after we moved to Thedford, they apparently knew we were coming. I was invited to teach the Grand Bend congregation to sing as well. After six weeks they were good at it and I left the church, for good. That is a different chapter, I won't go into that now.

While still in Delaware, our children went to the Catholic school. Soon it was time for the first Holy Communion for Gabriel. While preparations were in progress at the school, Gabriel talked about going to confession, because he had to be "pure" for this big event. Miep talked to the pastor and indicated that children of that age do not sin and this practice of confession could be left for later. This did not sit well with the reverend Father. On the Sunday following he preached that a parent did not see a reason for 7 year olds to confess. "What nonsense!" he said. All this, while Miep was sitting in front of him! Providence was on her side though, when a year later, during a sermon by the same enlightened priest, we were told that the Bishop did

not see a need for confession before the first communion. He added, "this was not needed, since 7 year olds do not sin". Did he come to Miep and apologize? You know the answer.

Once, during a parent-teacher meeting Miep asked when the use of the strap would be stopped, since that was not the proper way to teach children. Ouch!! All hell broke loose. We were literally pushed into the corner, Everybody shouted, one parent yelled that "if his eight year old daughter had the strap, she would get the belt when she got home. That's the way to raise children, your children would come to no good". We went home, dejected but knowing that we were right. It so happened that the following winter I was chosen to join the school board. In those times, every school had their own board. One day, the same lady principal, came to me, sweet as syrup to ask if I could do some fixing around the school, since I was the man with the toolbox. Sure, I spent the whole evening doing little jobs. Before going home I happened to look in her desk drawer and there was that infamous piece of disciplinary instrument. Out of my toolbox came some contact cement and I glued it to the drawer bottom where I had found it. I never heard a word about it! What we did hear some time later, was that the big school board in London was discussing the elimination of the strap, which in time became a reality. Nobody, but nobody, ever indicated to us that we had it right all along. Somehow, our children have grown up "not too bad".

1968. During that time, we sold the Delaware house for \$ 19.000.- and paid \$ 21000.- for a beautiful house just outside of Thedford, situated on a 20 acre property, with bush, a ravine, and a stream with fossils, just ideal for the kids. I proceeded to build a new shop there but couldn't get a mortgage because of being "out in the sticks". Here I was, with little income, high expenditures, bank loans, could not sell the shop in Lambeth, due to a bad economy, was behind in property taxes and the rest. It looked grim. In 1970, the Credit Union's loan limit was now higher than before, and with the generous help of manager John Strijbosch, we set the business up on a better footing. I worked my a.. off, and to make a long story short, in 1978 we gathered the children around the fireplace and burned two mortgages. We had paid off the loans, had sold the Lambeth shop, and the sun shone again. Bingo ! (Again).

We also had good moments. The buckets were quite unique, so much so, that we got a write-up in the London Free Press, and were included in the London "Shunpikers tour" where hundreds of visitors dropped in on a Sunday; and had a television crew over for a news item, twice; once for Kitchener



Ponybrook Farm, the place we love.

TV and once for Windsor. It was a busy time, also for Miep, who had to feed the family, give

support, look after the 5 children and make ends meet. She did it and all praise goes to her! The children knew that money was scarce; they helped in the shop almost every day and learned where the money came from, (or not), something many children never learn. They had valuable lessons, although I would rather have shown them in a less stressful way.



Thedford Shop

We also went to many craft shows which came into vogue at that time. Sometimes we made piles of money, and once we sold for only \$ 35.-. Craft Shows were in the neighbourhood villages, but also in Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto. Exciting but hard work. Miep turned out to be a super sales person. In Ottawa, we ran out of products. I drove home in the evening, (8 hours), and drove back during the night. Good luck that Wilfred came

along, he could do the driving while I slept until we hit sleet rain and the truck went ... almost off the road. He saved us and we made it in time for that day's opening.

From a show in Toronto, I had to rush home one evening, after calling Ruth, my trusted employee, to start machining a particular part. We made it, sprayed it, dried it, packed it, all in time for the following morning opening in Toronto. Ruth, of Finnish extraction, worked for me (us), for 35 years. She was like a sister. Looked after the house and cat while we were away, worked hard, was trusted, never complained and retired when the business was sold.

Building all those planter buckets and ice buckets led me to building a planter box. I always spend time to get something right before putting it on the market. I bought a machine, a hard to find, good, heavy duty one, to apply fiber-plastic banding to keep the boxes together, and used a stain which would never fade, True! I found it by going to a lab in Toronto and challenging them, until an older employee pointed to the solution. The planters became a success and we made them without modification until we sold the business.

I always went to flower shops to sell the buckets, but now with the new planter boxes, I switched to garden centers, who would place larger orders, and things were great. One manager, who used to run a garden Center in Montreal, encouraged me to go there, and supplied me with addresses. There I went, with a van full of planter boxes. My French was poor, to say the least. I could say Bonjour, and the answer would be something I did not understand, but many people accommodated me with their good or not so good English. (Again, my school French taught me the le and la's but no French conversation.) At one small place we both got stuck. I handed him the product, he used thumb and index finger for the cost, I wrote it on paper, he fingered again for quantity, I unloaded, gave the bill, he paid, I left. Before climbing in my truck I looked back and we both started to laugh. Too bad I never met him again, for in time I learned enough broken French to have enjoyed the reunion. He may have re-ordered, I don't know; because an agent in Montreal looked after the sales afterwards. I also had an agent in

Ontario. The agents sent me the orders and I delivered and invoiced. They worked on commission. It worked well and I stayed home.

I then decided to build a trellis, but I made it a foldable trellis. This was never done before, or since. Soon I built an automatic nailing machine, but that was too slow, so I designed another one and had it built by the experts. \$ 21.000.- Now, two people could assemble 600 units in a day. I used a special nail to prevent the trellis from coming apart, which was a common problem. Storage was now easier and shipping was only a fraction of the cost. In my GMC van I once transported 1000 trellises. The nails for the trellises were special as mentioned before. I imported them from Indiana. They were only used by one other firm and by me. When the other firm stopped, they cut me off as well. I was then able to coax a Montreal firm to make them for me. The shortest ring nail they made was 1-1/2" but I needed a 1-1/4 ", a length not used by anybody else. I bought 5 skids to make it worthwhile for them. (When I later sold my business, they were almost used up).



Trellises, folded and stacked.

Pine lumber was bought in Northern Ontario, from a wholesaler. I had my pilot license by then, (Yes mother, but more about that later,) which enabled me to go there and do it all in one day. The wholesaler had an amphibious plane so he would meet me at the North Bay airport and from there we went from lake to lake to the various places, to inspect the lumber. After supper he then would drop me off at my plane and I would fly home nonstop in less than 3 hours. Simple.

To get my product on the market I would go to various landscaping shows. Drive there and set up, stand on your feet for three days, eat and drink in the evening with the other exhibitors, and you were bushed by the time you came home again, but it all paid off. I did shows in Moncton, Halifax, Montreal, St Hyacinth, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. Some shows were for wholesalers who handled my product in that area. Every year was more or less the same. It was in Montreal in the Palais de Congress that a few men asked me to join them for dinner. Those invitations always came during the last hour. We boarded a taxi when my Belgian friend Ziggy, warned the driver to go straight to the address in Old Montreal, because John, (me in the back seat), used to be a cab driver in Montreal. The man drove to the neighbourhood but was not sure where the place was. I told him then to turn right on this street and turn left at the first intersection, go one block and it is right on the left corner. He went there and, sure enough, I was right. He mumbled that at first he had not believed Ziggy, but now he did. I may have been at that place before, but in those very narrow streets in old Montreal, I had no clue! Bluff pays off sometimes. It set the tone for a very lively evening, as we always had.

One year, while at the January Landscape Show in Toronto, my daughter Sylvia called me at 2.30 AM. Miep was feeling sick. She had called a local friend, who called an ambulance. Not knowing where I was, except somewhere in a hotel along the airport strip, Sylvia located me on

the third call. (That's Sylvia). I rushed to the hospital in 3 hours in cold winter weather. I took Miep home with me. Veronica and Wilfred, both living in Toronto, went to the show to man my exhibit. All ended well, but it was scary. Being alone at home and in distress will test your limits.

I also visited the hardware show in Chicago, where it took 2 full days just to see the garden centre section. I always made money going there by getting ideas for new products, meeting new suppliers from whom I could import parts etc. One place made birdfeeders. I knew the company's name, because they had tried to sell in Ontario, but he told me that the border crossings were too complicated for those light weight boxes, brokerage fees, taxes, etc. We became good friends. He supplied me with the pre-cut parts, and all the know-how. We assembled the feeders in Thedford and sold them to the market, which I already served with my planters. This was just the time that birdfeeders came into vogue and here I was with a complete, proven line in wood, plastic, steel, and market ready, without having to do all the research. I did make a few improvements though, the way I wanted it. That went well. I rented a 24 ft. Ryder truck (both Wilfred and I had a DZ license), and made the 4 hour trip to Muskegon in Michigan to load up and then back across the border in no time, but I was caught a few times at the scales for overloading. (One time they fined me \$ 1000.- US. Pay now!). We built different jigs, holding a nailer, and pushed the wood against it. In a matter of a few minutes we had a feeder in the box. We made them for about 10 years until the market slowed down and I needed more space for other products.



Lots of lumber, lots of dollars.

Shipping to all the various addresses was Wilfred's job. UPS was the courier, sometimes Purolator. Several times there would be two UPS trucks in the yard.

One morning I spoke on a Toronto radio phone-in program with Mark Cullen, author of many gardening books, and president of Weal & Cullen Gardens in Toronto. The subject was of course birdfeeders. Later we did the same on television. That was fun, and gave us good publicity.

I stopped buying lumber in Northern Ontario when I could not find the right quantity and quality anymore, but through my Michigan connection, who always used redwood, I was given a contact in California, so off we went to the great US of A. That first year proved to be difficult, too costly and poor delivery times. I had already advertised in the landscape trade magazine that we now used redwood in all our products, a well known and more expensive lumber which will never rot.

I was waiting for the first truck to arrive so I could make the products for the annual show in Toronto, but problems arrived instead. The truck left Los Angeles too late, but the driver drove all out for 5 days, breaking the law, and arrived at the border at 2.30 in the morning. I hauled him across the border, took him to my broker and through customs, and guided him to the shop in Thedford. After a few hours of sleep until daylight, we unloaded. I quickly took some of

the first pieces because all the show samples still had to be made. I left at 1 pm for the 3 hour drive to Toronto, worked my butt off setting up, and was ready by 9.30 that evening. The next morning the show began. I was there and ready, wearing a suit and tie!! Yikes, that was close.

During that first trip with Miep, visiting a mill near Los Angeles, we saw how they made small pieces of redwood, to be used on barbecues, A trailer load per day. I saw an opportunity and took a few pieces home to make a square planter. Those type of planters were known to break open due to the pressure of soil and water, but I got around that by utilizing the banding machine again. The banding went under the top and bottom molding so it could not be seen. (The competition still has not figured it out, nor have the right machines). It took a while to make the jigs, but after that the assembly went fast. I still see my products around in front yards, and in good shape.

We also made a fan trellis, but oh, they break easy. But we found a way of preventing that. Crosspieces with holes in them were produced, fast, on an horizontal drilling machine. I had an old machine rebuilt and it could drill 84 holes at a time, hydraulically. Now, the fan trellises lasted forever.

Later we built a set of strong round tub planters. Again, they would always stay together, thanks to that banding machine we had.

The year after, I found better redwood sources and at a better price. Nosing around those huge places and buildings, I found piles of cut lumber pieces which were left over, wrong size or whatever. I bought them for a song. (I sing tenor). Over time I bought four tractor trailer loads of that stuff, besides the regular lumber. Those buying trips took almost a week of work. Of course buying California Redwood was much better than pine for my purposes and it came almost free of knots and had a smoother surface. People loved it and sales went up again.

Those mills are big. Miep and I went once to a sawmill by invitation. (Sawmills cut the logs into boards, from there it goes to re-manufacturers who will make whatever you want). We witnessed how those big logs were de-barked with a powerful jet stream of water. Once on the big band saw, which cuts both ways, the logs would be coming and going and were completely cut up in a few minutes. I mean logs of 5-6 ft in diameter and 20 ft long! Very impressive. Many times I have seen logging trucks on the highway, carrying three logs, each 50' long, and that was a full load! Once, I was at a re-manufacturing place where they were milling a six inch base board. The boards were fed automatically from a forklift into a high speed moulder, which was built inside a box to cut down on the noise. They shut the machine down, but it took another 25 minutes before the cutter stopped. It's true, they do things bigger and faster over there.

In 1978 Miep and I made a trip to the east coast, and on the way back, via the US, we saw a gazebo in Vermont. I had always wanted to build one. Miep talked to the owner in his little workshop, and I had a closer look at the gazebo. Back home I tried to draw a plan. I wanted it in kit form, as a DIY project, but did not get anywhere. I had to go to Quebec City a week later, and drove via Niagara Falls to Vermont again, to see it once more, but I found that I had passed



Square planters.

him in design already. Still a nice trip. In the shop, together with my helper Ruth, we built a prototype. Shortly after, for the annual landscape show in Toronto, where the Botanical School students would always build a central master piece, I asked if they would like a Gazebo in there. Yes, they would. With the help of my two daughters, Sylvia and Veronica, we set it up. I sold 14 units during the show! It was a first! Nobody else in Canada manufactured them. A year later many garden centers wanted one at their place, and could hardly keep up.

The Veronica



I actually did not want to manufacture them, it was just a challenge for me to design and build one. Later, competition came in and I could back out. At least, I gave the impetus, and now you see many of them. We sold about 150 units over a few years. I showed them from Halifax to Winnipeg, in shows open to the public in Montreal's Olympic building and in the Velodrome, in Ottawa, Windsor, London and Toronto. One evening we built two at the same show. We also built one in Allen Gardens in Toronto for the movie "Ann of Green Gables, the sequel". They painted it green and white. From there we moved it to the Aberfoyle Mills restaurant near Guelph, where it is still used for wedding pictures. (see photo).

In the springtime, we made many deliveries with leased trucks to Quebec City. Wilfred drove many trips, which would take three days and hard work. Finding your way was no fun. Montreal is 800 km from here, and has too many highways, but I learned how to listen to the people explaining it to me (in French!) and I learned to get around anywhere in that beautiful city. Good restaurants, friendly, lively people. Many years later, in 2007, Miep and I went to Montreal and the staff at my usual hotel recognized me! Good service followed.

One day I received a call from someone who was a buyer for the newly created big box store "Aikenhead" which later changed its name to "Home Depot". He was familiar with my products because he used to work at a garden centre where he had sold them. He wanted the whole line. Birdfeeders, trellises, rose-arbours, planters etc. Miep and I were invited to view the new

place in Toronto. Back home, I spent hours doing the paperwork for every product. etc. News leaked out and the garden centers were not pleased that I, and dozens of other suppliers, were going to supply the "Big Box" store. Up until then, garden centers were always Mom and Pop operations, some of them very big. They could buy from me on the same conditions and price and pay in 30 days, but that was never done in those days. Home Depot built additional



Lumber storage, indoors.

stores in many cities, even on the West Coast in Vancouver and I supplied them all. Different "big boxes," as we called them, started up. They were also interested. Canadian Tire expanded and invited me for a meeting in Toronto, Home Hardware ditto, and several others, even on

the east coast. It was wild. We had to ship on a daily basis and call trucking companies for pickup. You had to be on time and with a complete order. If not.... you were out, just like that. We made our own bar codes, including the name of the product. Wilfred did the preparations, loaded the products on skids, and then onto the trucks. Peggy, my secretary, did the paper work, all computerized. Home Hardware and Canadian Tire picked up every week, Home Depot and others sent their own carriers. For the West coast we delivered to a rail yard in Toronto, for the East coast another trucker, etc.

The springtime was of course the busy time, but in August we had nothing to do and sent the staff on holiday. In July I bought lumber in California and had deliveries spaced during the winter. The staff made all the parts in the winter, stacked them on our home made metal frames, and stored them throughout the shop. The shop was warm and the winter stayed outside. In the morning, as the staff arrived I would ask them what they were going to do that day. They told me and I would let them, and went to the office. They could work on their own for days. I built many jigs to facilitate the work. Because of the efficiency, we were able to satisfy the "Big Boys". They wanted capacity!

We have shipped products to all the provinces, including Labrador and the North-West Territories, and this summer, on a visit to Dawson City in the Yukon, where our daughter Veronica teaches at the School of Visual Arts, I found two of my fan trellises in a garden of the "Pierre Berton House." Those orders were not very big: but I loved it.

The trellis sticks were made at a high speed. Three people made the longest 7 ft sticks in three seconds each! Of course, time was lost by bringing in additional stacks with the forklift, and cleaning the waste pieces afterwards, but it went like sh... through a goose. I enjoyed that. Mass production suited me better than custom work.

We also made rose arbours. They used to be shipped in three pieces, two sides and a top. When I switched to redwood, which is lighter and softer, the nails would not hold. So I tried screwing them together. It worked well but meant more labour time. I hit upon the idea to let the public do that. So we pre-drilled holes, punctured the spots where the screws had to go in, added a baggy with screws and a simple drawing; bundled the whole thing in an eye-catching long narrow white box, showing a good colour picture and measurements, and now could ship 60 or 70 rose arbours on a single skid. No transport damage, and always a clean product for the customer. They loved it; me too. It saved a lot of problems and time and money. In California I found a stack of just the right coated wood screws, 25000 screws per barrel. I bought several skids, (for a song again), which lasted me until I sold the business.

Planter boxes could be assembled from the machined parts in 1-1/2 minutes. That's why I went every year to carefully select the lumber in California.

Just once we had a major accident. A long board was kicked back from the table saw at high speed, straight as a bullet, and broke Wilfred's thighbone, while standing 15 ft away. He needed surgery to install a steel plate and spent several weeks convalescing. He is questioned every time he goes through an airport scanner.

Flying; You do that in an airplane. I have always wanted that. Jacqueline knew that too and



The front office

while babysitting for a neighbour pilot she organized a little trip for me. That did it. A few weeks later I started lessons, and 14 flying hours later I went solo. (No pilot will ever forget that sensation). An examiner tried me out and after landing he said, "see you later". I flew the "circuit" which is a square pattern you follow from take off to landing. I passed. After that, there were another 30 hours to learn stalling, spinning, navigation, meteorology etc.

etc. Difficult, but fun to learn. Add to that another 15 hours for night flying on instruments. At night, you see more, radio reception is better, and you feel all alone, but rich and privileged to be able to experience all that. My children have been passengers many times. Now I am old but glad that I did it. It's a friendly community. On commercial flights over Canada or over the ocean, I have been in many cockpits chatting to keep the pilots awake. I am still a member and still have my pilot license, but let my yearly medical lapse. It costs a bundle now to do this for a hobby. I only paid \$ 1100 for ground school and flight training. Today, you easily drop \$ 6000. One evening, while still a student, I went up, alone, to do training. The fuel gauges on that plane were poor but was assured that there was enough left for two hours. When the motor stuttered for a second, while simulating an emergency landing, I looked for altitude and managed to climb to 2500 feet, where I leveled off. There, the engine died. Boy, believe me, it gets quiet up there. While doing the May-day routine and all the necessary radio work and calculations, I was still able to stretch my glide and drop it onto the runway. A bit fast, but still a good landing. After all, I was still a student. I heard then that search and rescue in Trenton, 500 km away, were already alerted. I still believe that my mother (see above), held my hand since no stewardess was available. After that adventure, I would dipstick the fuel tanks myself and not rely on the experts.

After I sold the business there was a time of feeling strange and lost, and we had to get used to a different routine. Slowly we found different ways. Miep and I became involved in a land trust. The land and buildings belong to the trust, but the farmer owns the livestock, machinery etc. There is a store where organic produce, eggs and meat are available. On Saturday mornings, people would come to shop and visit while enjoying coffee and conversation. I helped where I can. One day I found a used cash register, and repaired a scale, which shows the price of whatever is put on there. Next I found out that the record keeping was not working so I set up a spreadsheet, and with information from the cash register tape, we had a clear idea of what was sold. I found out that no computer was used to keep track of the farm expenses. I bought a program and took over the banking, so now the accountant gets the proper year-end information. I have helped out with the haying and the harvest of corn and enjoyed it. I even learned to milk the cows with a machine! They milk about 32-34 cows, which means early up and late down. No rest. Of course, milking by hand was something I could teach them, but with a machine it is different. Their cows were beautiful, clean and well looked after. They treated them with love and care. They understood several commands, at least when the lady farmer Ellinor talked to them. They wouldn't listen to me, but I still liked being there. They were like

children, and very tame. The herd is sold now and we all feel the loss. New plans are in the works. We just wait, something good will turn up.

Having a rather unique surname means Genealogy is less complicated. One of my forefathers started to put the family tree together, in a large book, in beautiful handwriting. My cousin Nico in Holland went further, using a small program on his computer. Good work. This interested me, and I took his records with me to Canada, bought a bigger program, and slowly put together the names of about 1700 namesakes, which together with the names of spouses and children's spouses, total about 4800 names. This gives meaning to the biblical phrase, "Go forth and multiply". My cousin is still actively involved and we work together. This is very time consuming, but I find it a very interesting hobby. The internet helps a lot, and we continue to find more information. I became also aware of the fact that many young children did not live long. It is sad to see a family where three children have identical names, in a row, one dying before the next one was born. My own parents lost three children before I was born: one by drowning, one in a farm accident and one just two days old. The other six children lived a long life. I am the youngest. Always was, still am.

In 2006, I decided to build a windmill, to produce hydro. I designed the 100 ft tower, which can



wind is cheap.

be raised and lowered with a winch. The first mill came from China. Pure junk. Old parts were used to put it together. That one went back to the dealer. Then I bought one built in Arizona, US. It is only 3 KW but it runs rather well, although daily production varies between max 30 KW to zero. It feeds the house and any excess goes to the grid, for which I get paid about the same price as what we pay for a KW. All in all, not a money making business, but it is "green"! We also have 2 solar panels on the roof to make hot water. That saves a lot of hydro in the summer. On some days, the water is hotter than the hot water tank usually makes it. During the summer I can shut off the hydro to the tank for 3 months. The rest of the time, it augments it, depending on the availability of sunlight.

Looking back at my life's story is like going to confession. You feel better afterwards, especially if you omit your shortcomings and mistakes. Yes, I made lots of them, but was also lucky in many ways. We had good times too. All in all, I am glad to have been part of this world. We have been blessed with 5 beautiful children who get along well together. They are all different in character and skill, and all are wonderful people.

Gabriel has a degree in architecture from Waterloo, and works in Toronto. As a child he was already interested in buildings and in drawing. He still is.

Wilfred has a degree in History from Huron College, and traveled around the world, and made many more trips to far away places. He has stories to tell, and photographs to prove it. He produces artistic pieces on his woodturning lathe.

Jacqueline studied Urban Planning from Waterloo and became a stay-at-home mom, for several years, and is now working in a large optometrists office.

Sylvia has a degree from Ryerson in Toronto, and does the marketing and promotion of their photography business. She is also runs the office in the studio.

Veronica got a degree in fine arts from York University. She is a known artist with golden hands. She made many “live” animals for the movie industry in Toronto. She presently teaches at the School of Visual Arts in Dawson City, Yukon Territory.

We also enjoy our four grandchildren, who, I am sure, will show us to be chips off the old block. Miep and I are retired from business, but still have lots of work to do. There are computers to run, roads to walk, and books to write. Miep has successfully published 7 small books. There is the vegetable garden, the herb patch, and the flower beds, the snow in winter and the kitchen all year round. Miep and the kitchen keep us healthy. Wilfred is here to help us with the heavy work.

We are fortunate to live here, in the middle of nature. The future is ours.

Thedford, summer of 2009