

Dutchman to American: The Life of Jake De Jong.

By: Jacob Vander Weit



Taking the time to sit down with our older generation to get their story is a wonderful opportunity. As a society, it is a shame that we tend to overlook them. With fading hearing, decreasing eyesight, a walk that has slowly become more and more a task rather than an involuntary action, and a fading memory; the younger, more upbeat, society tends to think that the older generation has no use. This thought is not only wrong, it is downright dis-respectful to the men and women who worked much harder for what they had than any of us will in our entire lives. I believe that we should embrace them and take every chance to bring the limelight to them, let them bask in the attention they so richly deserve. Bringing back “Life on the Pamlico” is a great way to do this. This is a great way to not only learn new things about a new friend, but, as in my case, a great way to preserve family history. It has taken me a little longer to get this to paper than expected. Procrastination isn’t the case here, laziness has nothing to do with this. It is the pure fact that I am not doing this just for a grade or a diploma. This is preserving family history. This task that I have accepted is probably the hardest thing I have done. This simply is difficult because of the fact that putting my grandfather’s life story onto paper or into words, it is something that requires perfection. I love my grandparents. I thank God everyday that I have all four of them still living. There is so much you can learn from them.

One of the most influential and strong willed people I have ever met is my grandfather, Jake DeJong. He would never give up. He endured a lifetime of struggles to better his life and the life of his family. It’s amazing that someone would leave his home country. He left everything behind, his friends, his family, his job. He dropped everything to leave for a new country. The bravery is astounding, realizing the risk of nothing going right and losing everything. Growing up as a young man, a trip to go see the “Farm Grandpa” was a trip very much looked forward to. I believe my brother, Phillip, and I would refer to my grandparents on

my mothers side as the “Farm Grandparents”, obviously referring to the farm they owned and operated. Referring to my grandparents on my fathers side as the “Water Grandparents”. Yep, you guessed it, they lived on the river.



These highly anticipated trips to the “Farm Grandparents” were awesome. I knew for

sure that I was going to be a farmer when I grew up so going there was a big deal. To me, there was a special connection on that side of the family, particularly with the kids. We all, at some point in our lives, helped out on the farm. So us kids were around each other quite a bit. We all got along (most of the time) and enjoyed farm work. I always got excited to go there. Not only was I going to see everyone, I was actually going to help with the farm work. Obviously being an important part to the farm staying together and running efficiently, I would put on my boots and go out to find anyone doing some work to offer my expertise. Often I would find my grandfather milking cows, shoveling cow crap, or running a tractor. He was always the busy one. If there wasn’t much to do, he would make something to do, and then do it. Still to this day, you won’t find him sitting, but outside doing all he can to stay busy. He would always take a

moment to greet me and ask me how I was doing. After I would “help” him get back on track doing whatever he was doing I would either get sick of being outside or else find someone else to bother. After doing what I needed to outside, I would come back inside to find my grandma, Annie DeJong, my mother, Irene Vander Weit, and a couple other relatives either making some lunch or sitting and talking.

Now, I don't know if there is anyone else in the world that is a bigger “The Price is Right” fan than my grandmother. Whenever you would walk in the door it was on. The ageless Bob Barker and his numerous beautiful models filled the TV screen. If there was a channel devoted to “The Price is Right”, she would not only watch it religiously, she would own it. Oftentimes, as a kid, I would want to watch something else. Slowly getting up, looking to see if my grandma was paying attention, I would slowly raise my hand to change the channel. This was not a wise move. You didn't ever touch the TV unless you were turning up the volume during that show. So, with no other choice, we would sit back and enjoy. My grandmother is a wonderful woman. She has a wonderful sense of humor and is an overall happy person. Always there to keep my grandfather, and anyone else who needed it, in line. If you were acting like an idiot she would let you know.

As I pulled into the driveway of the old farm, not much has changed other than the skeleton of an old dairy farm in the background. Some people might look at that dairy farm and say it is a rotting waste of space. Not to any of us; this is where we grew up; this is a part of our family. I notice in the back, my grandfather doing something in one of the old barns. He is busy as ever, not ever taking the time to just sit down and relax. That is the way he is, a hard worker. He notices me and makes his way towards the house. He greets me, extending his worn, leathery hand toward mine. We shake and we make some small talk before entering the house. As I

follow him inside I remember flashbacks of a time when the entire family was around. Thinking back to past Christmas celebrations at the DeJong farm. The dining room area was always filled with string of tables where we would have our meal. The seats occupied with the family I love. With my grandfather at the head of the table. I can remember, when I was younger, when he would pray. His Dutch accent was so thick I had no idea when he was done praying. So I remember just looking at him and watching. When he would lift his head it was over. I think that everyone had the same problem as I did, because when he was done and lifted his head, it was like a domino affect. The meals would always lead to arguments on church issues. That was the kids cue to leave and go play hours upon hours of basketball on a full stomach. When the deliberation on the church issues was over and the tables were cleaned and put away, We would all come back inside for opening presents. I will never forget the picture of a large pile of presents underneath a midget Christmas tree. It never failed. Unwrapping our presents always led to wrapping paper fights and grandma always giving you the look when the fight was officially over. Then just times of going to the farm and walking in that very room and seeing Grandma sitting in her favorite chair, with the TV tuned to, yep, you guessed it, “The Price is Right”. Then going over and

cookie.



picking out our favorite Dutch

Getting back to reality, I walk into that same room and discover my grandmother in her favorite chair. The time is over for “The Price is Right”, but I can guarantee you that it was on. Setting my recorder up on the table, my grandfather takes a seat. I sit right across from him, my nervous hand presses record and he asks me what the subject is. Ironically I look at him and smile. “The subject is your life, Grandpa.” He laughs and I ask him to begin where he grew up in the Netherlands.

Jake DeJong grew up in a small town named Slieedrechd, which is about 15 miles southeast of Rotterdam. This is where he had his schooling as a young man. He lived in Slieedrechd for his first seventeen years of his life. His folks were not farmers. He had no farmers in his family. His dream was to be a farmer. His folks wanted him to go to high school and University, but he didn’t like that idea. He instead went to Agriculture school in Holland. He would go for two years and 2 days a week he would go to school and the rest of the week he worked on a farm. He lived at home during this time and worked for a dairy farmer. The region was mostly dairy farming. The area he lived at was on a river. He did not want to be a dairy farmer. He left home and moved in with a dairy farmer for whom he worked for. He went to live and work for a man named Vem Beem. He did not receive any wages while working for him. Vem Beem provided him with a place to stay and to teach him how to be a dairy farmer. The reason why he did not make any money was because if he received wages then he would be considered a worker and would not be allowed to live with the farmer. There was segregation in the area where he lived, by race but by class. The working man class had lower seats in theaters to watch a movie, and even in church.

Vem Beem was a nice man and treated him well. He lived with him for a year and went back to school. He attended a 2 year agricultural school across the river from where his folks lived. He went to school and lived at home for three more years. He graduated in 1939, then he

went back to the same farmer and lived with him. In 1940, the Germans overtook the area. So he decided to go live back home during this time. After a little while he went back to live with Vem Beem for 2 more years where he did some more work. After those two years he went back to live with his folks where he worked for another farmer across the river. To get across the river he needed a workers permit to get to the farm where he worked. If he did not have that paper, the Germans would have taken him to Germany. One Sunday he went home to see his family and on his way back the Germans tore up his workers permit and told him to go to another little town. Obviously knowing that this was not a good situation, he decided it would be a better idea to go home, so he did. So he stayed home. He did some military duty as a prison guard for a little while.

Vem Beem asked him to come back and run the farm because he was going to enter politics. His older son would have taken over but he was in the military. He agreed to work for him and after he got married when he was 24, Vem Beem gave him a house to live in. So my grandfather and my grandmother got married in August of that year and then went to live and work for him in November. He stayed and worked until Vem Beem's son came out of the military. So my grandpa needed a new job.

So he went to work for a company who exported seed potatoes for 2 years.. At this job he basically weeded out sickness and different varieties of potatoes. He would look over bags of potatoes and check to see if they were okay. He would grade them and certify that they were okay and then they would be exported. After this job, he went to work for an agriculture extension service.

While he was working for the extension service, he saw an advertisement for people in America that wanted a group of ten farmers to come over. His old employer, Vem Beem, told

him that to him it sounded like a good idea. So he went to his employer at the time and told him that he had a chance to go to the United States and start farming on his own. His employer informed him that he better make sure that it was as good as advertised before he left everything to go to the U.S. So he thought it over and decided that he would take the offer. This is the amazing part. He had a good job in Holland and an opportunity to move up the ladder of that job. Instead he left everything for a “chance” that he would have a better life in America. It was not only him, but his family of four. It was my grandpa, my grandma, my Aunt Ellie, and my Uncle John. So packing everything up, they decided it was time to go. This wasn't a quick plane ride either; it was a nine day boat ride over the Atlantic Ocean. That in itself had to be intimidating. But it was all for a chance to live in this great country we take for granted. So they made the journey in December of 1951.

The boat ride took them to New York He immediately got on a train and headed down to Atlanta where he then took a bus the rest of the way to Alabama to their sponsors. Their sponsors would finance them and help them with farming. His sponsor's name was Belmont Nickerson. As soon as he got to his destination, he was hard at work. Right when he made it to his house he had to go and milk cows. My Grandpa enjoyed working with him. He treated my Grandpa and his family well. One problem arose with my Grandpa when he came over to the United States, as did many immigrants that came. The language barrier was the biggest problem that arose when he came. Mr. Nickerson helped as much as he could with this issue. He would say a word and make my Grandpa and his family repeat it back to him. “Great patience. I could not have done what he did.” That is what my Grandpa said referring to the patience Nickerson had while teaching them the language. As time went on, my Grandpa worked very hard on the dairy farm. Working on a dairy farm back then wasn't as easy as it is now. There were no

milking machines at the time, so everything was done by hand. One day his boss bought a milking machine but didn't know how to hook it up. So my Grandpa hooked it up and that was the first time he ever used one, and according to him it was a wonderful invention. Ever since then he used a milking machine.

Farming with Nickerson was going very smoothly. The group, however, started to fall apart. The minister that came with them was not a good man and people didn't agree with what he was saying and doing. According to my Grandpa, he should of been a lawyer, haha. Things were going well in Alabama, but more opportunities arose to change locations.

One of his friends, Chris, had cousins in Washington state. Since my Grandpa had no family here in the States, it didn't matter to him where he moved. So Chris wrote his cousins. Chris' cousin returned his letter saying that they would need seven hundred and forty dollars to travel there. Money was tight then and my Grandpa didn't have the money to do it, so that fell through. He still wanted to move.

North Carolina was another choice to where he could possibly move. He and Chris set off to North Carolina to check it out. They made it to North Carolina and liked what they saw. The only problem with North Carolina was that nobody would pay very much to work for them. A man they met in Alabama named Van Dorp lived in North Carolina and owned a farm. Van Dorp did not need anyone to work at the time. He found work with a oil jobber, whose last name was Brinson. He owned eighteen hundred acres around the Terra Ceia area. Chris went to work for Brinson and my Grandpa went back to Alabama to meet up with his family and asked Nickerson if he thought the job in North Carolina would be a good idea. Nickerson told my Grandpa that he could not make him stay in Alabama. He also told my Grandpa that he was looking at it wrong. The money in Terra Ceia was in the tree business. The area was covered with forest and needed

to be cleared for farmers. One of my Grandpa's friends bought a farm and had it paid off in three years by using the money from the trees on his farmland.

My Grandpa and his family moved to Terra Ceia, North Carolina on March 18, 1953. He worked for Van Dorp and he lived in a house owned by Van Dorp. An opportunity arose to move back to Alabama when his sponsor told him that if he moved back there he would buy land to farm and sell it to my Grandpa. My Grandpa said he really had to think hard about that proposition. He did not take that offer and opted to stay in North Carolina.

Van Dorp was the big farmer in the area at that time. He owned thousands of acres of land. He tried to start up a dairy business but went broke. Van Dorp was very good to my Grandpa and his family. He worked for Van Dorp for awhile. He had an offer to go and get a job in New Jersey. He went up and visited but did not like it at all in the "Concrete Jungle". He came back and had a very interesting offer that was waiting for him.

Jesse Waters had one hundred acres to sell to a "good Dutch man". The land came with one dozen pigs, a house, a barn, one cow, and a tractor. The offer was all that for twenty seven thousand dollars. He thought that was a good deal and took it. This is the same house that he lives in today. Along with building his own farm, he continued to milk cows for Van Dorp for a year and a half. He started to buy more cows for his farm and bought milking machines from a farmer in Grassy Ridge who was selling his farm.

At that time he had eight cows. He sold his milk to a company in Washington, North Carolina. The farm grew, more shops and buildings were put up, more silos were erected, and more cows were bought. Time moved on and the farm was running well. The time came for my Grandpa to retire. He sold his share of the farm to his partner and his son, John De Jong. They were milking one hundred twenty five cows along with around one hundred twenty heffers and a

few bulls. So at this time there was approximately two hundred fifty head around the farm.

When the heffers' number got too great, they would sell some off. They sold their cows to places as far away as countries in South America.

My uncle wasn't a big cow guy. He preferred to be in a tractor plowing or planting. His love was doing farm work. So my Grandpa did most of the work with the cows while my uncle did the farming. The biggest reason my Grandpa left that up to my uncle was because my uncle was great at fixing things and my Grandpa hated fixing things.



Even after my Grandpa retired, my uncle would stop by and visited every day. I remember when my Grandpa got out of the dairy business, uncle John's kids would do most of the milking on a schedule. I helped out my cousin, Ryan De Jong, when it was his turn to milk. Milking is no walk in the park. We would get up at four in the morning and round up the cows and start milking, before school. When we were done with school for the day, we would go right back to the farm and milk again. The farm was sold, except for the house and some property around it including the majority of the barns, in 1997.

My Grandpa and my Uncle John were very close. When my Grandpa sold his share to my Uncle, Grandpa wrote him a letter saying that he loved him. This was not often spoken but was always known. When my Uncle died in 1999, my Uncle's wife, Pat De Jong, read that letter. It was a very hard time for everyone, but was especially hard for my Grandpa. That was his only son. The letter basically told him that while they were working together, those years were the best in my Grandpa's life.

Thinking back on this project, I look at the courage it took for my Grandpa to leave his home country and come to America. At one point in the interview, Grandpa explained how his parents came over while he was in Terra Ceia and asked him why in the world he left Holland to become a dairy farmer in America. The irony of this statement lies in the fact that he came to America to avoid being a dairy farmer. But he enjoyed his work after he got into it. It was a great privilege to be the one to tell the story of my Grandpa's life. My Grandpa is a great man and is someone to be honored. My entire family and I love him very much and I'm happy I can be the one to preserve a little of our family's history.



A great man and an even better Grandfather.