

N) 5660  
4/2/2006

Interview with Mrs Johanna (Anne) van Hoek for Whitehorse Historical Society conducted on 21 April 2006. Interviewer Melanie Farrow.

INT: I was fascinated to learn that you were actually born in ---

ANNA: The Dutch East Indies, which is called Indonesia now. My father was sent to the Dutch East Indies by the Shell Company and my mum followed him a year later, and they started a family in Borneo, a place (called) Balikpapan, which is called Kalimantan now. Every four years my father and mother had a holiday back to Holland, paid by the company, for six months. But then the war came and we were all interned by the Japanese for three years. After the war we were lucky that we came all together, and that none of our family died during the war, and we went back to Holland.

INT: So let me get the time scale right: when did your father first go to Kalimantan.

ANNA: In 1926 and mum followed him in 1927. Their first child, my sister, was born in 1928 and I was born in 1929, and my brother (was born) in 1931.

INT: And so you were there all that time up until the war ---

ANNA: With holidays back to Holland.

INT: And you were interned in ---?

ANNA: In 1942, and we came out of the camp at the end of 1945.

INT: That must've been a terrible experience.

ANNA: It was, it was. But we were lucky that the whole family came out in one piece, and in 1946, by ship, we went back to Holland. We stayed with family and all that, until we got a house for ourselves - because Holland also came out of the war and there was a shortage of houses. Then my father went back, because he was still an employee of the Shell Company, his next job was in Singapore and he worked there for five years and he retired when he was 50.

INT: You said that you hadn't spent very long altogether in The Netherlands. How many years did you spend there?

ANNA: Eight years.

INT: In fact all your [early] memories would be of Indonesia?

ANNA: I had a very good time in Holland because my high school was in Holland, where I had a good time. But we didn't get any education during the war, we were not allowed, of course. So I still had to finish the last year of primary school when I went back to Holland and then I started high school, and this is why I only have three years of high school, because by that time I was 19 and I did four years of tertiary education and became a medical analyst, you know, working in a laboratory at the hospital. Then I got to know my future husband and we married and we migrated to Australia.

INT: What made you decide Australia?

ANNA: Holland was overcrowded, there was not much future in Holland, so we were actually encouraged to go to Australia, or Canada, we had a choice. My husband at the time was a medical student, he only had to do two years and he would have been finished, but there were so many doctors already in Holland and they encouraged him to finish his studies in Australia because there was a shortage here. But because it is a study that you can't do at night time, and he had to work for money of course, he never finished his studies. Yes, it's a shame. But he got on anyway, he went into computers and became a computer analyst, programmer, and that was the story.

INT: So what made you decide - who were you actually encouraged by ---

ANNA: The government ---

INT: They were actively recruiting emigrants in other words?

ANNA: Yes, yes. And lots of people also went to Canada. My sister migrated two years before us, and perhaps that's why we chose Australia, - she could accommodate us for a year or so.

INT: So it wasn't difficult to make a decision between Canada (and Australia)?

ANNA: No, no.

INT: ...when was that? After the war, in the early fifties?

ANNA: We migrated in '54. We got married on 3rd July and we left home by plane, not by ship, on the 17th July and at that time, every night you were not spending in the plane but on earth, and you stayed in a hotel.

INT: It must've been a very long trip?

ANNA: Four days. Nowadays you do it in 24 hours. Four days.

INT: What route did you take?

ANNA: From Amsterdam to Karachi, then Bangkok, Manila, Biak, that was the eastern part of New Guinea, that was at the time still a Dutch colony -

*[Mrs Van Hoek rang me some weeks after this interview to let me know that she had made a mistake when locating Biak. It is in fact in the west, and is in Irian Jaya]*

and from Biak to Sydney.

INT: Presumably you flew Dutch Airlines?

ANNA: Yes, KLM (laughs).

INT: Yes, KLM (laughs).

ANNA: And the plane was called the Constellation. Constellation.

INT: And did you have to fund your own trip?

ANNA: Yes.

INT: You did. You got no support, not like, say, the Italian migrants who were coming here then?

ANNA: Perhaps you could, but you were put on a list and you had to go by ship, yes. And I think that my father, my father paid for this trip. Yes.

INT: And when you arrived, was your sister here to meet you?

ANNA: In Sydney, we arrived in Kingsford Smith airport and she was there with her husband, and yes, with the car; then back to Wollongong, and lived in Wollongong for a while. My husband had to take, of course, any job that was available - there were lots of jobs available - and they still work in Wollongong, Port Kembla, Woollongong.

INT: That's right. I recall you told me your sister was coming to visit from Wollongong.

ANNA: Yes, yes.

INT: I'm intrigued by this plane journey. Was it very gruelling? I mean, it's bad enough these days.

ANNA: No Melanie, there was plenty of room, only two seats like this next to two seats there (*Anna indicates two seats separated by an aisle*) seats were like this (*indicating wide seats with her hands*), and every night in a hotel was also exciting wasn't it (*laughs*).

INT: So in fact it was probably a more leisurely journey ---

ANNA: Leisurely than nowadays, yes. More room in the plane, not as many people of course, yes.

INT: Not wanting to interrupt you, but it did intrigue me, this plane journey.

(*laughter*)

INT: Now, your sister met you... in Sydney --

ANNA: And we drove back to Wollongong, to her place; she already had a house, with her husband. So we stayed there. Migrating is very difficult to do. Of course we had learnt English at high school, but to speak a second language is a different matter. (*laughs*). You would think and then start to speak - and in a conversation you'd think 'oh, I'd better mix in this conversation, because ---'. And by the time you put your effort to talk, they

already changed the subject. *(laughs)*. But you do it, you do it. And if I would have a chance to do my life over again, I would never be a migrant any more -

INT:           Wouldn't you?

ANNA:         No, I would like to be a born Australian, because this is the best country to live in. But to be a migrant is difficult.

INT:           Yes, yes. I don't speak any other languages, but I have tried to learn them and it's very, very difficult. Is that what you found to be the most --  
- I was going to ask you what your impressions of Australia were, when you arrived.

ANNA:         Oh, very good. But I think homesickness comes in about three years, I suffered. You miss your family, your friends and all that. You feel very deserted, put it that way. Although I've been so lucky with my neighbours, they were really always lovely to me. Especially the neighbours here in Blackburn.

INT:           In a way, you've been a migrant twice. First in Indonesia, then to Holland, and you wouldn't have perhaps had a lot of friends in Holland?

ANNA:         All my aunts and uncles, of course, and nieces and nephews. But you had no language problem you see. Holland, that was also difficult. Holland was, at the time, so narrow minded, especially in the religious part, and Indonesia was free and of course the climate, the climate you have to get used to. But the narrow-mindedness in people, a bit difficult, but we got used to it.

INT:           In Indonesia did you mix with a large expatriate Dutch community, or did you ---

ANNA:         Yes.

INT:           You did -

ANNA:         Mum and dad, but because my father worked for the oil company we were always in little places and mum would teach us say, the religion, just stories out of children's bible. I still remember them - there were no churches in the neighbourhood, but we still had --- but not the strictness that was in Holland - you have to go to church every Sunday and if you didn't, you know one of the elders would visit you during the week, "Why are you not in church?" *(laughs)* ---

INT:           What denomination was that?

ANNA:         Protestant.

INT:           Protestant, yes.

ANNA:         But that's all evened out in Holland with time, people are not going ---

INT:           Well they're known now aren't they, for being a very liberal society.

ANNA: Too liberal I think. *(laughs)*.

INT: I gather from what you've been saying that the biggest problem you had was language?

ANNA: Up here?

INT: In Australia.

ANNA: Yes and no family around me, in the beginning, you know what I mean. Relatives - mum and dad were in Holland. When I got married - I stayed with mum and dad until I got married; it's different from what they do nowadays. So perhaps I was overprotected before I migrated, something like that, yes. You miss your family, and of course the language, but there were quite a few migrants that have the same problem. It also took me - it worried me that I had an accent, but not any more, that's because I think 40 per cent of Australians had an accent didn't they.

INT: You had your sister, but you hadn't seen her for two years, had you? And that's the only support you had really when you arrived is your sister - and she married an Australian?

ANNA: No, a Dutchman, yes. We stayed in Wollongong for two years and then we went to Geelong, because my husband got a job by the Shell company in the laboratory which was more in his line than working at the steel works. So we went to Geelong - and then from Geelong he got a job in the computer - ICI here in Melbourne. We came to this place in 1958.

INT: You came to Whitehorse -

ANNA: Nunawading. And I'm still here. *(laughter)* We arrived in Nunawading one day before Anzac, so the 24th April, 1958, so 48 years in this house.

INT: So really your moves have been associated with your husband's work - the move to Geelong was work related and also the move to -

ANNA: To Melbourne.

INT: To Melbourne - but what about to Whitehorse, was that work related or you just liked the area -

ANNA: Yes, we had friends living in this area and we liked it, especially the lake area and all the trees around us, yes, that's why we chose it.

INT: And has it changed much?

ANNA: Yes, a bit. The roads were not made, there was no sewerage and no phone in the house so you had to go the phone booth at the end of the street. Fortunately this house was already built and it had a septic tank so it was not too bad. I had lovely neighbours. They helped us a lot and- Mr and Mrs Cottingham (Flora & Bob). Mrs Cottingham is now in a nursing home and we often talk about olden days because when we arrived in this house they had

Venetian blinds and later on she said: 'Anne, I said to my husband Rob, 'they have a dog' - you know we had a dog, 'and they are Dutch' (laughs), but we became the best of friends.

INT: Was there a large Dutch community in the area?

ANNA: No, there was not, no. People over the road were Dutch.

INT: Did you find you were seeking out other Dutch people?

ANNA: No.

INT: You were happy to blend in?

ANNA: Yes. We wanted to blend in and learn the language and be part of the Australians. Yes.

INT: You said you liked the trees [in Whitehorse], but was there any else you particularly liked about this area?

ANNA: It gave a nice feeling and also, to compare Melbourne with Sydney, we found the climate was more, you know, European. You have the cold weather, you have a little bit of the warm weather - Sydney was always warm, most of the time.

INT: And is there anything that perhaps annoyed you a little, or that you don't like about the area?

ANNA: Not really.

INT: Not really, I didn't think there would be somehow. *(laughter)*.

ANNA: And, you know, there was not a large shopping centre like there is now, so we had to do our shopping, weekly shopping, in Blackburn itself. There was a shop called ????. My husband and I we would do that on Saturday morning. We had no car yet, so we used to have the children in a pusher and walk through the lake area to Blackburn. But the roads were made - I think my eldest son was about six, and that was good, and the sewerage and all that.

My husband built that part of the house [motioning to rear of house, only because we got our youngest son 10 years later. But I had lovely neighbours, she helped me a lot.

INT: Would you say that it was your neighbours and from support like that you got the most benefit from?

ANNA: I did.

INT: Were they Australians?

ANNA: Australians. Flora and Bob Cottingham. She could help me with so many things and also she laughed a lot about the mistakes I made in my language. No, but she said 'Anne, I'm not laughing at you, I'm laughing with you'. I had to explain her about wire, near the fence, the wire and I didn't

know that word in English so I translated exactly the word in, what you would say in Dutch. And I said: 'You know Flora, iron string'. She laughed and laughed. We had, how you call them, the trees with - can't get to the English word - trees in the yard, the front yard - wattle trees, that's it. One morning I saw a big white witchety grub in the tree and it gave me a shock, and I went to Flora and I said: 'Flora there is a big animal in the tree.' (laughter) I knew it, at that point, 'animal' word. And she said 'Anne, this ??? (inaudible) (laughter), she taught me a lot, yes.

INT: I might just stop that ...(pause in tape)

ANNA: ...Blackburn Lake school, and then Johann followed and my other son. And there was a high school where the shopping centre is now, see, the Chase shopping centre. But it was a high school, and now there is all houses being built there.

INT: So you have seen a lot of changes in 48 years.

ANNA: Oh, yes. And then the bus service through the street, that came.

INT: And you had a bushfire here too didn't you?

ANNA: Yes, I can't remember when that was. The children were already - there has been quite a bushfire. I packed my bags and we were sitting here, and we had to leave, we had to leave. Fortunately I was driving the car then.

INT: Where did you go?

ANNA: To another street in Blackburn, further away. It was concentrated in the Blackburn Lake area. And by that time I also had the bird so I put the cage on the back seat (laughter).

INT: So has it changed for the better, do you think, this area?

ANNA: Ya.

INT: In what ways?

ANNA: The convenience of a made road, shopping centre close by and the bus service to the station, that is more convenient.

INT: There'd be a lot more houses now?

ANNA: Sure, a lot more houses. Perhaps it was a bit more one big family before because on New Year's Eve we could make a big bonfire. Everybody was bringing their old tyres, you know, and rubbish to an area in the Blackburn Lake and we would make a bonfire.

INT: Of course that would be highly illegal now.

ANNA: Ya, On an open spot of course, ya.

INT: You said you were naturalised in 19--?

ANNA: 1959. '54 we arrived so five years later we could apply for it and that was done in the evening, and Flora and Bob afterwards asked the neighbours together to celebrate.

INT: How many were actually at the naturalisation ceremony?

ANNA: I don't remember, quite a few. Perhaps about 50 I think.

INT: And you had no second thoughts, you thought, no this is what we want to do?

ANNA: I had a little bit of second thoughts, but my husband was determined. You know, like I said: 'We are living in this country we want our children to be growing up here and we should be naturalised.'

INT: What was your greatest fear about being naturalised?

ANNA: It was just a sentimental feeling. You know, my own Queen (laughter) and that was a bit silly, because it doesn't make any difference to your feelings.

INT: Do you have any nostalgia for The Netherlands --

ANNA: Not any more. No, not any more. I've been back seven times and I always call this my home country now.

INT: Seven times.

ANNA: I've been back to Holland, ya, to see my parents and all that. And my husband and I, we did a tour through Europe, France. I must admit, my first trip back to Holland was after 19 years and of course we were still in our penny-pinching days, and my parents paid our trip. But you don't feel part of Holland and the Dutch people any more when you are in Holland. No. They have changed as well, not for the better (laughter).

INT: What's happened there?

ANNA: Too modern thinking, too aggressive, all that, yes. Religion doesn't take part any more and that's no good either is it. The churches are empty. Holland was so conservative before, too conservative, when we arrived in Holland after the war - -

INT: Now you think it's gone too far the other way.

ANNA: Too far the other way. But perhaps that's all over the world, I don't know. (Lets dog out).

(Interruption to recording as Anna let dog out)

ANNA: ? had to work at any job and Australia needed people, labour, labour people, not professional people, so he went to the steel works and worked as a labourer there. Being a medical student, it was quite hard for him,

but in hindsight I think it is also good for your own makeup, in hindsight, that you go through a difficult time.

INT: And you did find that time difficult?

ANNA: In a way, for him it was, to do that work. But earning money was important, and he did overtime and what they called double, doublers.

INT: What sort of labouring was he doing? You said the steel works --

ANNA: ...everything, the how you call it, the fires and all that, yes.

INT: And this, was in Wollongong was it?

ANNA: Port Kembla is where the steel works is, it's part of Wollongong. And we lived with my sister for about eight months and then we were able to rent a garage in somebody's back yard and we lived in the garage, but we made it really liveable. That is also where my first child - I got pregnant - and my first child was born in Wollongong ?? And we lived in the garage with the baby for three months and then my husband got a job in Geelong, at the Shell company.

INT: And you did tell me but I've forgotten I'm sorry, the job in Geelong was - medical analyst?

ANNA: I am --

INT: You're the medical analyst, right. And in Geelong what job did he do? When you moved to Geelong.

ANNA: Laboratory of the Shell Company, laboratory, yes. It was more in his line, ya. Then eventually he go on to do study further, but he had to go to Melbourne for that and he got a job at the ICI, in the office, so gradually he built himself up.

INT: And did you work as a medical analyst?

ANNA: Not here, I was ?? (inaudible) -- The idea was that I would go to work but ... so I became a mum and I'm still a mum (laughter).

INT: No disgrace there, not at all.

ANNA: I've never worked. When the children were out at school I could, and my mother in Holland, she was growing close to becoming 80 years and I thought I want to be in Holland when she turns 80 and so I went to the council and I had a home help job I was sent to only twice a week - two elderly ladies - and it was good for me. Further on I joined the tennis club in Blackburn and that was terrific. So I only worked at the council for two days in the week, two days tennis and that was my life. (Laughter)

INT: Sounds like a good life.

ANNA: So I got the money together without upsetting the family budget, to go to my mum's 80th birthday.

INT: That's very enterprising of you. And you saved up the whole fare?

ANNA: Yup. To go to Holland. I stayed with my parents so there was no money needed for that part. But I saved it.

INT: What about the rest of your family. You have a sister who's still here and you have a younger brother?

ANNA: A younger brother's in Holland.

INT: Do you ever see them now?

ANNA: Yes. Every time when I went back to Holland when my parents passed away, I stayed with him.

INT: So how long is it now since you've been back.

ANNA: Two years ago.

INT: Two years.

ANNA: And I think that's the last time.

INT: Why is that?

ANNA: When I left Holland I thought, no, I'd love to come back just once more, but now I have second thoughts: the journey. You start to feel that you are getting older, although you don't want to admit it, but your body tells you. You get tired very quickly.

INT: It is a long trip.

ANNA: Long trip. But perhaps I'll squeeze in another time, I don't know. The last time I flew, I shouted myself on a business class ticket, and that makes a difference. You have to start to think you can't take your money with you ??? (inaudible) isn't it. I'm not rich, but I can live my lifestyle and that is all that matters.

INT: It must have been very, very difficult for a young couple where the husband was trained almost as a doctor to be living in a garage.

ANNA: But you know it makes it easier that most people were in the same boat, you're not the only one. That makes a difference.

INT: In those early days though, did you have misgivings about what your life would be in Australia?

ANNA: Did you think 'Have we done the right thing'?

INT: No. When you are young and you have a difficult time and you always think there comes another time. It might be difficult when you are old, I think that is difficult, but not when you are young and you are determined to reach a certain standard, you get there.

INT: You came here - you were determined to make a go of it?

ANNA: That's right. Also my husband, he was a hard worker, yes. He was brainy and yet also very clever with his hands, by building on rooms of the house, renovating. It was a well built house, but not very enthusiastic about --- there was a room and a ??? - like a box, a square box. So he opened this wall - this was a bedroom actually and so the lounge room was larger, because we used to have our meals in the kitchen and that was OK, but this is better isn't it. And he opened that, so we have a hallway and ??? (inaudible).

We've never been sorry that we migrated, never. You know, my husband's parents, especially his mum, and my father (???) were always trying to put you in a certain direction and I think if we had stayed in Holland those two would have made our life perhaps a little bit difficult. Well, being so far away from the family you had to battle for yourself and had your own choice. Yet you missed your family as well, your relatives and all that, but perhaps this was better to do what you wanted, heh.

IINT: So you think perhaps you gained a little freedom.

ANNA: Freedom, and in difficult times you had no interference of parents. So that was in a good way. We were also a little bit fortunate. Buying this house you needed a deposit and we were lucky, my father helped us with the deposit which we gradually, we paid back. Otherwise, if you were just on weekly wages how do you get a deposit for a house and the wife is not working, that's true.

So we were lucky. My parents came to see us and also my husband's parents.

INT: When did they come out? Some years ago.

ANNA: My mum and dad in '58 and in - they came back about three times; and ???(husband's name) parents twice, my husband's parents.

INT: Well that's a fascinating story and I'm filled with admiration -

ANNA: Good Melanie, that's it -

INT: Thank you very much.

End.