

## **Some of the words: A visit to the old country**

*Grace Hols*

Remember the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words”? Well, I have a lot of pictures: black and white, some already fading. So I am trying to write the words, or at least a few of them. This process involves an intimate study of a photo, to the point where I take a magnifying glass to zoom in and capture details otherwise overlooked. The result of all this is a growing collection of vignettes that I am calling “Some of the words.”

### **A visit to the old country**

In this photo we are far from home, or maybe we have finally come home, depending on your point of view. Five people, two older, two middle-aged, and one young person. It is about 1970.

The older couple is my Opoe and Opa, my mother’s parents, Hendrik and Annechien Lubbelinkhof. Opa, silver-haired and trim, is dressed in a jacket with white shirt and tie, and is seated comfortably in an armchair, large cigar between the index and middle finger of his left hand. Opoe, or Oma, as we also called her, is a storybook grandmother, slightly plump, in a belted, floral print dress, wearing Granny glasses and with her hair pulled back into a bun. She would have had that warm, close hug and a soft lap to sit on had I been around her when I was young enough to climb on laps.

Beside Opoe is my aunt Liny, Mom’s younger sister. She is tanned and pretty, dressed in a skirt and sleeveless top. Her handsome husband, Oom Henk, sits beside her. They are laughing. It’s hard to know what is so funny, but Liny is holding up what looks like a large lemon.

Between Opa and Opoe sits a young woman, looking a bit tentative, holding a small wine glass or a shot glass to her mouth. She is also tanned, short-haired and wearing a shirt and long white pants. That would be me, about 21.

I am in Holland, along with the rest of my family. We are on a six-week trip back to the Old Country. My Dad has just sold his farm (was forced to sell it really, to a large corporation that wanted his property in Houston on which to build a large lumber mill in the late 1960s, but that's another story) and decided to use part of that money to take us all back to the country he and Mom grew up in. We spent a couple of weeks in Holland, then travelled by Volkswagen van to Alicante, Spain, where Dad had rented a condo for us to spend another couple of weeks on the beaches of the Mediteranean Sea. We returned to Holland tanned and full of stories of how we packed nine of us into the van, slept at roadsides under coats and blankets, ate food prepared on makeshift camping gear, and lived to tell the tale. The family in Holland must have thought we were nuts. They rarely ventured anywhere; some of the family had never even been to Amsterdam, and they must have questioned our sanity when we thought nothing of driving days and nights to go to Spain.



*Me with my aunt and uncle and grandparents in Holland, ca. 1970. From the author's personal collection.*

But we did, eating croissants fresh from a bakery in France and washing them down with coffee heavily laced with milk, waiting for what seemed like hours at

border crossings in the hot July sun in a van with no air-conditioning, finding our way through places like Nice and northern Spain with limited knowledge of the language and maps. I was not one of the drivers and I remember reading James Michener's *Hawaii* as we drove; my way of coping with too many bodies and often too much noise in a small space.

Back to the photo. What was the occasion? Are we gathering for one last evening before we leave? The room we are in looks cozy, which is one word that applies to much of what we saw in Holland. In Dutch the word is *gezellig*, which doesn't translate well at all. It means cozy and warm and friendly and fun all at the same time. In Holland we found hospitable people, people with *time* for us, inviting us into homes with plants and flowers and lacy tablecloths and comfortable chairs in a circle, sheer curtains in the windows, a fireplace, and always much good food: coffee and cake and many bottles on the tables with gin, liqueurs and beer; plates of sausages and cheese. That Opa is smoking a large cigar speaks to a special occasion, our safe return from Spain and our imminent departure back to Canada, probably.

It was news to me that people in Holland had so much free time on their hands, so much time to visit and drink coffee and spend time with each other. In Canada it seemed to be all about work, and the work was never done. In Holland the homes were older and small but comfortable and completely finished. Everyone had electricity and indoor plumbing, which we in Canada had just recently acquired. Much of the family in Holland lived in row housing, so the backyards were small, with a shed maybe and a sitting area on a tiled square. There was a community garden at the end of the row where our aunt and uncle grew some beans and potatoes. Our backyard in Canada was large and unkempt with stinging nettles and dandelions, and grass that was cut only occasionally because there was so much farm work to do. We had a large vegetable plot to grow much of the food for our large family. Flowers were a luxury, although Mom always cultivated a few.

The broken postwar Holland we had heard so much about no longer existed. In the twenty years since Dad and Mom had left, there had been rapid recovery and repairs, but if my parents noticed, they did not dwell on it. They were happy in Canada and never regretted moving. Dad would not have been able to buy land and farm had he stayed in Holland.

Our unmarried uncle, Oom Arend, had moved out of his row house while we were in Holland, and we had made ourselves right at home in it, all nine of us. I remember he had even planted some vegetables for us to use while we were there. Sometimes a few of us were invited to go across the street to eat our warm noon meal at Oma's, and I remember that as a very special thing. She was warm and grandmotherly and a good cook.

In those days, vendors still went door-to-door in Holland: the baker, the butcher, the fruit truck and the milkman. We soon learned to listen for the ice-cream wagon and feasted on Holland's very fine dairy products. In the kitchen of our uncle's house was a large stone sink and counter, cold and hard, and the hot water came from a gas heater called a geyser, an ingenious device perched over the kitchen sink that heated water as you needed it, which seemed to make more sense than the way we heated and stored large quantities of hot water in Canada. I also noticed how the Dutch travelled in tiny cars that rarely contained only one person; already at that time (early 1970s) car-pooling was very common.

This photo is special to me because I am seated between my grandparents. It is one of the few times that I was able to do that, since I was only a year old when I left and really never got to know them very well.