

Janet Virginia (Wierda) Tazelaar's Life Story

As told to me by Janet, herself (with a few embellishments from her daughter, Mary) in May of 2016, as we enjoyed the view from her pretty little house overlooking Lake Macatawa. Kristine L. Sundstrand – Daniels

Janet Wierda was born in September 1920 to Frank and Effie Wierda in their Grand Rapids home. She was the first of nine children and although there was some English and German sprinkled in, they were mostly of Dutch heritage. Following Janet came Morrie (Bud), Orthea (Ork), June, Shirley, Elaine, Frank, Roger and Beverly. Janet was given the nickname of Slim because she was always tall and thin. When Janet was about three, the family moved for a brief period to Allendale to be closer to Janet's grandparents. Both sets of grandparents had large farms there which included numerous farm animals including cows. Janet remembers that, even though she was small herself, it was her responsibility to watch over her younger brother to keep him from getting stepped on by the cows because he liked to play in the fields. The job was not always an easy one for a little girl, but such is the life of the oldest sister.

After only two years in Allendale the family moved again to a rented home on 22nd Street in downtown Holland. Her parents eventually purchased the house and it would become their family home for the rest of Janet's childhood, and until her mother moved into a care facility near the end of her life. Janet's father was a Holland police officer for many years and her mother was busy at home raising her large brood. Janet has fond memories of playing baseball and other childhood games with her siblings and neighborhood friends. Their house was across the street from a park where they all gathered. A big swing hung from a tree in their yard and Janet would swing for hours, dreaming away the day. There were many family picnics with delicious small potatoes roasted on an open fire. These potatoes came from her father's thriving garden, which was his passion. He tended the vegetables and Janet's mother tended the flowers. Their large family always had fresh and canned vegetables on their dinner table.

The house they owned was small with only one bathroom for 11 people, but somehow they managed to wait their turns. They were luckier than the people next door who only had an outhouse. But those neighbors did have a piano and so an unofficial deal was struck where Janet could go next door to play their piano and the neighbor girl could come over to use the Wierda's bathroom. Janet remembers her father often asking "What's that girl doing here again?"

The highlight of Janet's summers growing up was spending most of them on her grandparent's farm in Allendale. Some of her siblings preferred to stay in town but Janet loved the open fields to run and play.

She also spent many pleasant hours on the back of their farm horse. Her grandmother held a special place in Janet's heart as she was such a kind and caring woman.

Janet attended VanRaalte Elementary school as a child and later graduated from Holland High School. She went on to beauty school in Grand Rapids where she stayed with her aunt and uncle while taking the nine month beauty course. Upon completion, Janet obtained her beautician's license and began a long and pleasant career cutting and styling hair. Janet loved working with her customers and everything about the business. She began by taking a job in a salon in Holland and four years later, when the owner had to leave to serve in World War II, Janet purchased the shop. When the owner returned from the war, however he took back his clientele and Janet decided to sell the business back and purchase a small shop in Macatawa next to the local post office where her husband worked. She owned her little beauty shop there for over 10 years. But now we are ahead of ourselves in this story.

In 1940, when Janet was 20, a neighbor and girlfriend invited her to go to a movie in downtown Holland with the girl's boyfriend and a friend of his. That friend was Arthur John (Art) Tazelaar. He gave them all a ride home after the movie. Art was the postmaster at the small Macatawa post office. It was closed for the winter, so soon after their trip to the movies, Art and his friend headed out west for two months of vacation and searching for gold. Upon his return, he called Janet's girlfriend to ask for the name of the girl who had been at the movies with them. He hadn't forgotten meeting her during his trip. For their first real date, Art invited Janet to go dancing in Grand Haven. And thus, their deep love affair began. They were married in 1941 by Art's uncle, who was a pastor, surrounded by their families in Art's aunt and uncle's beautiful home in Grand Rapids. Janet's sister was her maid of honor. Janet descended a sweeping staircase in a pretty blue dress to meet her groom. Later they had a family reception in a lovely restaurant in Grand Rapids, followed by a two week honeymoon in Florida. The couple was spared being separated by World War II because a doctor discovered that Art had a heart murmur.

Janet and Art moved into his family's two-story cottage next to his parents' home on the channel in Macatawa overlooking Holland State Park and Lake Michigan. In the chilly winters, Janet had to walk about a block from her parked car to their cottage. She always wrapped herself in a hand-me-down mink coat to make that walk against the biting Lake Michigan winds. She says it was the warmest coat she ever owned. The couple's love of the water and the beach kept them always close to Michigan and Florida beaches. They enjoyed long walks together and music concerts and dancing in Grand Haven. They owned a boat and water skied on Lake Macatawa. Their busy lives were always filled with family and many friends.

Art and Janet also loved to travel! Throughout their married life, they spent most winters in Florida. In between they traveled all over the country, visiting almost every state, including Alaska and four Hawaiian islands where they spent their 50th wedding anniversary. They also shared trips to Canada and Mexico. Janet kept journals and diaries of many of these trips recounting all the fun they had and where their journeys took them. She says she loved all the parts of America she was able to visit, especially the West Coast.

Because of their love for Lake Macatawa and the area, Art decided to purchase some vacant land overlooking the lake. About 2 years later, Janet's uncle, who worked for a builder in Grand Rapids, was commissioned to build a home on the vacant land that Art had purchased. Art helped with the project in his spare time. Then in 1948, Janet and Art welcomed their first child, a son they named William Arthur (Bill). About a year later, the family of three moved into what would become their dream home. The views of the water from the front windows were marvelous and ever-changing and the back of the house butted up to the wooded hillside behind as if it were an extension of the hills. Art's tiny post office and eventually Janet's beauty salon were only steps away in the row of little shops that stretched along the waterfront. Art even owned a general store there for a while. Their beloved cottage was just around the bend of the waterfront heading out toward Lake Michigan. Janet worked part-time at her career while also raising their son. It was an idyllic lifestyle. But their hope of having another child often ended in disappointment as Janet experienced miscarriages, one after another. Yet finally in 1957, nine and a half years after Bill was born, the Tazelaar's added a daughter, Mary, to their family and it was complete. Mary was the apple of her daddy's eye.

Janet loved being a mother and helping her children grow. They water-skied together on Lake Macatawa and spent many family days at the beach. Art built a makeshift raft in front of their house and they all spent happy hours jumping from it and swimming, especially Bill, Janet remembers. They rode bikes and often ventured to Castle Park with neighborhood children coming along. The family kept their cottage and rented it out for most of the year, except for the month of July. That whole warm, sun-kissed summer month was saved just for them. When July came, all four packed up and moved into the pretty little cottage around the corner, back where Janet and Art had begun their married lives, and spent blissful days on the beach.

When Bill and Mary were older, Janet and Art took them to Florida, even taking them out of school for a month in the winter since the post office was closed. They went to Disneyworld and other fun spots. There was a difficult time when Mary began to have serious trouble with her back at about age 15 which resulted in surgery and months and months in a back brace. Mary was bedridden for weeks and had a little bell to ring when she needed help. Janet was her caretaker and her days were full. But Mary was an active girl and eventually, even with her brace on, she was up and out with her neighborhood friends

whenever possible. Janet remembers Mary giving a wonderful speech at their church telling about her struggles as a child with back problems and Janet was quite proud of her.

Many years later, Janet and Art purchased a home and an empty lot located next to their home along the waterfront and gave one to each of their children who have both lived next door to Janet all of their adult lives. In 1999, Janet lost her life's love, Art, after 57 1/2 years of marriage, when he suffered a sudden aneurysm. She says "he was the most wonderful guy in the whole wide world". He was loved by everyone, especially her, and she misses him a great deal. They had a very long and happy marriage. Janet then discovered strengths she didn't know she had and learned to face her life on her own. A deep, strong and true bond developed between Janet's sister-in-law, Lois VanOosterhout and cousin Maggie Horn, who also lost her husband suddenly. The best explanation was three peas on a pod and the three musketeers all rolled into one. There were so many wonderful loved filled memories of them always together, sharing a meal, traveling and many sun filled beach walks. It was a beautiful bond, with a special kiss from God.

Janet attended Maple Avenue Christian Reformed Church with her family as a child, but it never felt like home. When she married Art, who grew up at Third Reformed Church in Holland, Janet began attending there with him. From the beginning, it was the perfect fit and it became her lifelong church as well. Both she and Art were very active there. Janet loved the people in the church and became very involved in their outreach and charity programs, especially working with schoolchildren in the area and also helping to feed the hungry in Holland. There were five or six circles that made up the charity works of the church and for a time, Janet was the president of those circle groups. She says that Third Reformed Church "has given her a blessing that no one can ever take away". Helping people there made her feel good and still gives her a lift when she thinks about it. Janet still attends services there when she can. Her faith plays a sustaining role in her life. She reads devotions daily and feels that each one is made for her own life.

At age 95, and now mostly looking back, Janet feels that moving to her home in Macatawa was one of the most significant moments of her life. Raising her family and making lifelong friends there has been a dream come true. She loved to keep her little house full of people and still entertains whenever she can. The magnificent views from the windows and porch of the home her husband helped build for her continue to be a balm for her soul. "Here in Lake Macatawa I have known peace and beauty such as I have never known in any other place" she once wrote. Her time in Florida stands out as well, especially Anna Maria Island where her love of sunrises and sunsets and salty gulf coast air knew no bounds. And always she was surrounded by her multitude of friends. She enjoyed many years with the Holland Garden Club, helping homeless people in Holland by serving food at the Soup Kitchen, and visiting the elderly at nursing homes. She sometimes wishes she could have done even more.

Janet has always been known for her smiles. She has been a contented and happy person who approaches each day as a new and special blessing. Although she can't bake, cook, and knit as she used to, Janet is still an avid reader in spite of failing eyesight. She continues to enjoy time with friends as often as possible. She likes to listen to music and watch a good movie on TV. She walks as much as she can, using her walker now. She loves being outside, loves her children a great deal, and enjoys having them live next door. They take her for rides around her beloved neighborhood and her fond memories of happy days gone by flow easily. She speaks of how good her children are to her, including Mary's husband Charlie. She says he's a wonderful son-in-law and she's pleased with how much he and Mary do for others through their church. She is especially proud of her Bill and what he has done for our beloved Big Red lighthouse, remodeling and painting the inside.

Looking back, she's proud of the home she made for her family and the beautiful relationships she's enjoyed with her wonderful husband and children. She has few regrets except perhaps wishing she had become a little better writer and a little better swimmer.

Aging is not for sissies, she says. It's harder to do the things she wants to do now but she believes that you just have to keep going anyway. When asked what piece of advice she might offer to others with the wisdom of her years, Janet smiles and says "Do all of the things you want to do. Do them now so you won't miss out on doing them. And spend time with your children." Janet has certainly made every attempt to live her own life that way in her 95 years to date....and what a joy-filled life it's been so far.

Footnote:

Since Janet didn't have any grandchildren of her own, please know how much she cherished each niece, nephew, and all the grand and great grand nieces and nephews, as her very own. She would never admit to a favorite, because they were all special in her heart and she prayed for each daily, for they were deeply loved.