

John J. Vandenberg—Words of Remembrance

Jack Vandenberg, March 14, 2014

John was born June 19, 1937, near Rhenen, in the middle of the Netherlands, close to Utrecht. His name at birth was **Johannes Jacobus—Han** for short—named after his father.

Han got two new brothers after that, the first a year later and then another four years after that. **Jan and Jaapje**. (That's the way we talked 65 years ago.) Han was the big guy, the oldest, the one who knew stuff and could do things. He wore glasses—it gave him an edge. They got broken once, when Han and I were horsing around, and I got a licking for it.

Han was schooled to Gr. 6 in the Netherlands, but did not acquire any skills in English. And, then, in April 1949 our family left for Canada...on a train to Le Havre in France, then on a boat to Quebec, and then on a train to Edmonton. Our family—two parents, seven children, and a 16-year old friend—rode in or on a truck, I think, and arrived on a farm near Busby in early May 1949.

That's where my **early memory** was formed, formed in the **shade of two older brothers**. Han & Jan. There were more older brothers and an older sister, but they left for Edmonton in the next year or so. There was also a younger brother, two-year old Wilco, but he couldn't talk, not then.

So there we were in the summer of 1949: **Han, Jan and Jaapje**, on a farm just north and west of Busby, Alberta. Translated into English, by the Edwards family across the field, our names became "**Han, Jan and Yappy**."

A few months later we began school at **Trail's End School**—a one-room school in the bush two miles away. There were about 25 students in Gr. 1- 7. The three of us walked to school mostly, we sometimes rode on a horse, even had a horse pull a sleigh with a stove on it. At school, our names became "**Hans, John and Jack**."

And we were Canadians.

Our Mother asked us to speak English on the farm so that she could learn English, and become a Canadian too, I suppose. We loved her a lot, and we liked talking English.

Trail's End School closed in June 1950, and then we went to school in Busby in September. We walked 1½ miles to the school bus and Hans had Mrs. Hunter for Gr. 8 and 9, and he liked her. I think he got the strap from her. Maybe he liked her more for that. A few years later I also became familiar with that form of learning. At Busby School, we learned the rudiments of being Canadian—the provinces, playing scrub, pump-pump-pull-away, and swear words.

In September of 1952, Hans began high school in Westlock and he caught a school bus at Greiner's corner four miles east. Not sure how he got there. Maybe on a bike, or walked. Not on a horse.

Hans was not scared of going to Westlock, which seemed far away to me and, well, kind of threatening. I recall that because, when I had to begin high school a few years later, the idea was intimidating. Which room do I go to? What goes on there?



But Hans was the “big guy” in our threesome. Talked with confidence. Not a bigmouth, not a smart aleck, but outgoing, sure-handed, kind of brash, easy to be with.

On the farm our Dad experimented with farming—pigs, turkeys, two milk cows—Willempje and Violet, and, later, chickens. Mother taught the three of us to milk those cows, and we became fond of them. And they of us, I think. They would come when we called.

Beginning in September 1953 both Hans and John stayed at the Nicholson dairy farm a few miles north of Westlock during the school year. They had milking machines there. But Hans got in trouble with his appendix—it burst, and his life was threatened. Fortunately, Dr. Whissel stitched him up, and Hans graduated in June 1955.

On the farm our Dad wasn't handy with tractors and machines, so the three of us did the mechanical work, and most of the physical work. Made us strong—nothing for us to swing a 100-pound bag of feed onto our shoulders. We ground the grain, mixed the chop with concentrate, and brought it to the chicken houses. I drove a tractor at age 10, and my big brothers pitched bales of hay on the hayrack. We helped build new chicken houses 84 feet long and 36 feet wide—each for 1000 chickens, the first in 1954, and then three more. Shingled them, painted them, then put the chickens inside, fed them, gathered the eggs, washed and brushed those eggs. We cut hay in the summer, raked it, baled it, and hauled it into the ceilings of the new chicken houses. We sweated, and had no showers.

None of us indicated any interest in staying on the farm, not then.

We talked about football and the Edmonton Eskimos who won the Grey Cup three years running in the mid-50's. It was a big time for us via the radio—Al Shaver and Ernie Afaganis on CFRN. We also kept in touch with baseball: the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers: Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford, Yogi Berra, Roy Campanella, Pee Wee Reese, Duke Snider.

We went to the Christian Reformed church in Westlock every Sunday. If we couldn't get to church, our dad might read a sermon in the living room on Sunday afternoon. In Dutch. Our dad taught us that movies, cards and dancing were against the rules. But the three of us didn't believe any of that—just some peculiar Dutch stuff maybe. Not for Canadians. But we sort of liked the church in Westlock. Maybe 20 families. They were good folks.

In April 1957 Hans left the farm, began work with the Alberta Government Telephones, AGT, as an installer, and there he became **John**.

This new **John** remained an extrovert, and he learned how to dance...very well, I thought, when I watched him later. Polkas, waltzes, fox trots. In Millet, Devon, Calmar...country dances. He told me about these events when he came to the farm from

time to time. And he learned to mold the AGT wires into compact and gracious forms, all over Alberta. I didn't hear about girl friends for ten years—don't know if he had any that lasted for more than a month. I certainly did not meet anyone, and never heard any names.

It was perhaps in 1966 that Avlyn and I learned of a new development, a bombshell from main office. "I had to pursue her," John explained. And there she came—the stunning Audrey. My goodness, we exclaimed. And she skipped onto the farm in hot pants, one spring day. Oh my, my, my. We have the picture.



And she danced into our lives.

At AGT John helped shape the beginnings of a communications revolution in Alberta--some say he designed an early version of mobile FaceBook on an AJAX handset. During his first years at AGT, John worked out of the 149th street office with about other 50 male employees. In the middle 1960's a fresh business college graduate from Carvel cracked the scene, and became the first female administrator—a blossom in a cloud of sweaty installers.

John set on the chase with Brylcreamed hair, cat's-eye specs and slick Busby charm.

He won her heart, and on April 1, 1967, John married Audrey Pawlyk. They rooted themselves in West Edmonton with the purchase of a \$19,000 home. And, over the next six years their family came to include LeeAnn, Loraine and Craig. A five year sojourn in Lethbridge also rearranged their horizons.

John continued to advance on the AGT ladder and was transferred back to the head office in Edmonton. They moved into a brand new house just west of the new “big mall.”

Daily family life centred around school, music lessons, soccer, hockey, the local Aldergrove and Belmead Community Leagues and Good Shepherd Church. John was a dedicated volunteer and taught his kids the importance of hard work, perseverance, generosity and serving their local community. John himself was always ready with a helping hand: “Just say the word and I’ll be there.”

John was a **very proud Canadian**, a dedicated “hockey-dad” in the winter. To Craig’s dismay, he always insisted on being early to games and practices, even at the 5am ice time in Winterburn. Tobogganing down Government Hill: the faster, the wilder, the better. In the summer, John loved to pack up the tent trailer and head for the mountains. He taught his children a love of camping, the outdoors and summer vacations in Alberta or BC. He loved getting up early to get on the highway before all the traffic. Johnny Cash or Tanya Tucker crooned on the radio. A glimpse of wildlife in the mountains meant an attempt at for a photo. Craig says, “Dad was always in search of the perfect photo-op, whether chasing down a black bear with us hiding in the Pontiac or stopping for a lushy wildflower alongside the road. He lined us up for the ‘family photo’ at any family gatherings.”

During their children’s high school years, John and Audrey maintained a disciplined household, expected them to study hard, respect their elders and act responsibly. But they also understood the importance of allowing the kids their fun, and always created a welcoming environment for their children’s friends to join barbeques or other events. Barbeques usually included beer and late night sing-alongs. And Craig got to use the garage for band practice with his buddies. When practices ran late, John flipped the electrical breaker from the house.

In the neighbourhood, John was known as the “fix-it-guy.” Nary a weekend went by without him making a house call to Zonnia’s or Loraine’s house to wire a plug, plumb a new sink or snake a plugged toilet. But he liked a glass of cold white wine at the end of the job.

In 1993 John accepted a buyout package from AGT--bought as many shares as he could from the new Telus operation. His legacy at AGT-Telus remains significant. John helped

organize the annual retiree's ball for many years, and bought the liquor for it—searched over town for the best deals. He knew how to buy. Last year he was presented with a plaque and a medal for his various contributions to AGT-Telus.

After finishing his telephone career, John learned to drive busses, big busses. Drove to places like Marmot Basin, Lake Louise and as far as Las Vegas. He became the safety supervisor at one point.

His children married in the later 1990's and in the early 2000's. Slowly, grandchildren began roaming into John and Audrey's lives, seven of them by 2010. Helping these grand-children grow up was a new enterprise, one they enjoyed a lot.

His grandchildren will always remember **Opa's** love of the phrases "yellow banana," "see you in the funny papers," "don't let the bed bugs bite." Opa was incredibly attentive and enthusiastic about all of their interests and activities and would never turn down an opportunity to take one of his grandchildren to hockey, lacrosse, swimming or piano.

John loved math and numbers. Craig says, "Dad was always teaching his children and grandchildren the importance of speed and mental math, showing them shortcuts to solving math equations. "What do you mean you don't know how to solve Pythagorean Theorem?"

In later years John and Audrey became **world travellers**, visiting Craig and Kimberley in Mexico and Australia, They explored Holland, the rest of Europe, Australia and New Zealand--swam with his grand-kids and the turtles on the Great Barrier Reef in 2012.

Dad lived his life always organized and well-prepared. He kept a daily diary and you could ask him what happened on any date, who he visited or where he was, and he would be able to provide the exact information.

At holiday meals **John** always **said grace**. His **words of thanks** to the Lord for all manner of blessings were elaborate and heartfelt.

John cherished his time with all of his family. All fifteen were present to share Christmas 2013 together in Panorama, BC. "Dad was very excited to have everyone together and celebrate," says Craig.

In early January the five Vanden Born couples, four brothers and a sister, had lunch at Ric's Grill in St. Albert. Looking back, it was as if farewell events were being put in place. We didn't know, of course, but a month later a jaundice that at first seemed minor was, in fact, a serious signal. Last week Thursday, at the hospital, John and Audrey vaguely talked about being home on the weekend. Maybe Avlyn and I would be able to come for coffee.

Instead, on Sunday morning John took up residence in his eternal home.