

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE OF THE WOERLEE FAMILY

Gerard Woerlee and Anna Ward



Figure 1
Anna's family outside their home in Java before WWII c 1960s
Courtesy: Gerard and Anna (Deceased) Woerlee.

The lives of Gerard Woerlee (1919) and his wife Anna (1923-2006) both born in the Netherlands - in Zaandam and Rolde - were greatly influenced by the 1930's Depression and the Second World War 1939-1945.

Despite the personal impact of these worldwide events, Gerard found a way to pursue his goal to work his way up into the management of a large timber business in the Netherlands, just like his grandfather had done. His grandfather was a manager for *NV. Houhandel v/h William Pont*, which at peak times employed upwards of five hundred workers. Wanting to succeed, Gerard enrolled in trade school night classes and worked during the day as an unpaid intern for various timber companies owned by William Pont. He wanted to gain additional experience in the timber industry in areas such as sawmilling, plywood manufacture and quality control, which could ultimately give him a competitive edge in realizing his future goals in management. In contrast, Anna, whose parents were both teachers, completed her secondary education and then, during the German occupation of the Netherlands, studied to be a chemist.

Gerard's bright future and plans were affected by the advent of World War Two. After a time in military service fighting the German invasion forces, he and two other ex-army soldiers were employed by the Zaandam Council to establish a card system to record all males of employable age living in the '*Zaanstreek*'. After working on this project for one and a half years, they made the decision to destroy all of their records. Destroying the card system meant that this information would no longer be available to the Nazis, who



Figure 2
Gerardus Woerlee with his Building Supervisor and Contractor on a building site. c 1960s
Courtesy: Gerard and Anna (Deceased) Woerlee.

wanted to access the records in order to recruit young Dutch males as forced labour in Germany for their war effort. Compelled to flee as a result of this action, Gerard hid for some time in the rural areas of the Netherlands, not able to return to his home. During this time he became involved in the resistance movement. He found work in Arnhem selling timber products for the *Zaanse Houthandel* until all residents were ordered to leave their homes by the German Army Command. Later, Gerard returned to Arnhem, now an empty city, to help the resistance movement source information about enemy strength for the advancing Allies, south of the Rhine and Waal rivers.

In 1945, Gerard volunteered to join the Artillery division, in the military, for deployment to the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). He was then sent to England for training to upgrade his artillery skills. After returning to the Netherlands in 1946, Gerard met Anna and they were married after just six weeks! Later in 1946, Gerard was sent to the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) with the 8th Regiment Veld Artillery. Anna followed him some months later as a Sergeant with the *Vrouwen Hulp Korps* (VHK), to work as a secretary to the Colonel of Supplies (VTD *Verenigde Transport Dienst*) - victualling.

For Anna, it was a return to the NEI. She had gone there previously with her parents and sisters in 1935, when her father took up a position as a School Principal. Later in 1939, Anna, her mother and two sisters returned to the Netherlands, to seek urgent medical attention for Anna's eldest sister. Two years later, her father, who stayed in the NEI, was interned in a POW camp, where he spent the rest of the war during the Japanese Occupation. His seriously depleted health led to his untimely death, shortly after being repatriated to the Netherlands in 1946.

Gerard and Anna were demobilized in Java, after serving for three years in the NEI army. They opted for migration to Australia rather than returning back to the Netherlands, 'because in 1949 work was hard to come by in Holland'. Gerard went about seeking employment in his area of expertise in the timber industry, which now included his specialist knowledge about tropical timbers gained while employed in the NEI.

Western Australia became their destination when Millers Timber and Trading replied to Gerard's letter, with an offer of employment. The army paid the couple's fare to Darwin and they paid their own way from Darwin to Perth. After working for some time, Gerard made the choice to become self-employed when his boss declared, despite his expertise, that 'Australians were not yet ready to take orders from a immigrant!'

The couple already owned a block of land by this time, as Anna had insisted on arrival that they spend £60 of their £80 army payout on a property. It was this decision that 'put us on the road to success!' On the property, Gerard built a shed in which the family could live. This was standard practice among migrants at that time, as due to the war, Australia's housing stock was down by hundreds of thousands of houses. During this time, Anna, then pregnant with the second child, lived in temporary accommodation in a city 'pension'. On completion of the shed, the family moved in with their two



Figure 3
Early days in the building business - Anna Woerlee and her children on the site of a new building contract.
Courtesy: Gerard and Anna (Deceased) Woerlee.

Figure 4
One of the first houses, which Anna designed and Gerardus built. This is their young family of four children with their Grandmother - Anna's mother.
Courtesy: Gerard and Anna (Deceased) Woerlee.



small children, despite having no water or sanitation facilities. Luckily one of their neighbours was willing to supply them with buckets of water daily for washing, drinking and cooking. Anna never complained, 'because it was sort of an adventure...a holiday and you put up with all sorts of things.'

Eighteen months after gaining his trade papers Gerard became self-employed as a carpenter, handyman, and builder in the country areas for farmers where the work was plentiful and the competition was less keen. He went from job to job on a motorbike with a sidecar. Gerard attributes the success of his contract business on a commitment to hard work, long hours and happy clients, who would recommend him to other farmers and business owners wanting work to be done. However, Anna and the children saw little of him in those early years.

Over time, Gerard and Anna established a number of successful building companies in Perth.

Anna's capacity for innovative ideas, house designs, costings and accounting procedures played a huge role in the Woerlees' ultimate success. For example, they found that they could establish companies under the umbrella of a 'Limited Company', which enabled them to utilize their working capacity more profitably. Furthermore, Gerard's quest for learning, together with his natural ability to transform concepts into tangible outcomes, helped to turn Anna's designs into highly saleable homes.

Within two years they had already built a speculation (spec ...) home for sale. From here Anna says they never looked back. Gerard had built the first few houses with a dislocated shoulder after a car accident. The insurance paid his wages during this critical time. Luckily Anna, very aware that they had

nothing to fall back on while establishing themselves in new country, had taken out insurance against sickness and injury.

They attribute their business success to their combined skills, team work and good business sense. She designed the houses, organised the necessary building permits and managed the finances. On the other hand, Gerard's skills were in building management and the careful estimation of the quantities and types of materials, which included bricks, timber and other materials required to complete each building. Their careful planning enabled them to reduce the overall price of each building, making it more attractive to the market while simultaneously decreasing the potential for pilfering from their work sites.

Gerard notes with pride how his wife's designs continue to dominate some Perth suburbs such as Thornlie. The city of Gosnells have formally acknowledged the Woerlee's building of many homes, which established Thornlie as the suburb it is today.

The couple raised four children, who now are in well-established careers in the areas of medicine, research and business.

The 'Woerlees' attribute their achievements and considerable financial success to having found each other and working as a team. Anna's belief was that they had found the right combination: 'What he couldn't do, I could do! We were born for each other ...but you've got to have luck in your life too, and we've had a lot of it.'

What they deem to be most important is making choices, then 'giving it a go' and 'make it happen! Don't be afraid, just get on with it and above all persevere!'



Figure 5
Anna and Gerardus Woerlee - Military service in Java 1946 to 1949.
Courtesy: Gerard and Anna (Deceased) Woerlee.

Figure 6
Anna and Gerardus on their wedding day - 10 September 1946 in military style.
Courtesy: Gerard and Anna (Deceased) Woerlee.

