

How Muskegon Became The Home Of The World's Best Butter Cookies

By Frances Harrington

In June of 1914, John and Marie (Van Ansel) Den Otter, boarded the ship "S S Rotterdam" at Rotterdam, Netherlands, with their 6 children, headed for New York, United States. Like many immigrants, they traveled 3rd Class (steerage). Their final destination was to be Muskegon, Michigan, where Marie already had family. She had a brother, Henry Van Ansel, who ran a grocery store on Terrace Street, and also a sister, Pietronella (Van Ansel) Duizer, wife of Gerrit Duizer, who worked in one of the local factories. The ship "Rotterdam" was fairly new, being built in 1908, and at that time, the largest steam vessel in the Holland/American line, so hopefully, 3rd class passengers had a better experience than those on older, smaller ships. It could transport 3,440 passengers, and of those, 2,400 passengers could travel 3rd class. It had a service crew of 472. One of the crew members was the fiancé of John's beautiful daughter, 21-year-old Hendrika/Henrietta Den Otter. The young man's name was Johannes T. Rijke (later known as John T. Ryke). Although he wouldn't be immigrating with the Den Otter family at that time, he would be meeting Henrietta in Muskegon 14 months later.

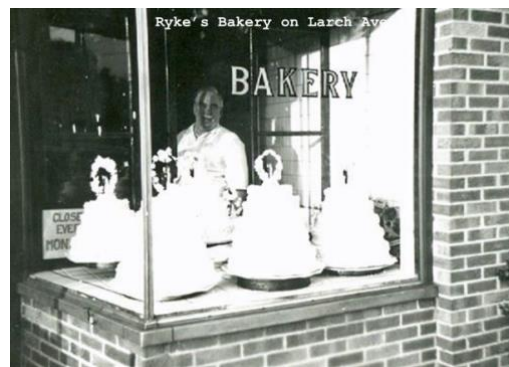


John was 27 years old when he took his last trip on the "S S Rotterdam", only this time, not as a member of the crew, but as a passenger. The passenger list had his occupation down as being a cook. He arrived in New York on 15 August 1915. He and Henrietta were married in Muskegon on 23 October 1915. John got a job working as an assembler at one of the fastest growing businesses in Muskegon - Campbell, Wyant, & Cannon (CWC was at one time, one of the largest gray iron foundries in the U.S). They spent the first couple years living with their in-laws at what is now 1702 Pine Street. In 1916, Henrietta gave birth to their first child, a baby boy who was stillborn. The next year, John and Henrietta moved into their own house at the southeast corner of Smith & Larch (now 1752 Smith Street). The couple had their second child, a girl named Marie (1918-2010). The Rykes would have seven more children: Johannes Jr. (1920-1923), Elizabeth "Betty" (1922-2011) married Garry Van Dyke, John P (1924-2000), stillborn boy (1926), Henry (1927-2017) married Ellen D. Terpstra, Samuel (1929-2015) married Anna Mae Spoelman, and Ruth (1937-2021) married Robert Carr.

In October of 1929, the stock market crashed sending Wall Street into a panic and causing the great depression which would last for ten more years. Unemployment in Michigan between 1930-33 was at 34%. In 1933, the Welfare News wrote that private groups and local charities could only fill about 15% of the need. By the time of the depression, John had been promoted and was working as a foreman at CWC. The foundry managed to stay in business during this time by curtailing hours, working short weeks, shutting down for weeks at a time, and reducing their work force. Even though John was able to keep working, he definitely wasn't bringing home the pay he once had, and by this time, he now had a family of eight to provide for. Being a proud man and not wanting to accept outside assistance, he decided to make some extra money doing what he loved to do – bake. John not only loved to bake but he was also very good at it. In fact, he wasn't just a "cook" like it said on the passenger list of the "S S Rotterdam" when he came over in 1915. John was actually a pastry chef, and had worked in some of the finest hotels in Rotterdam and for the Holland/American shipping lines.

When he wasn't working, John would make cookies in the family kitchen. You know what cookies I'm talking about...anyone who grew up in Muskegon has tasted those melt-in-your-mouth butter cookies. Henrietta and the children helped, making it a family effort. Everything was done by hand and with only the finest ingredients. The children would take samples to their friends, neighbors, and teachers. People just loved these butter cookies. The word spread and they started ordering the cookies, a dozen at a time. Soon John would have to buy another oven to keep up with the demand. Marie and Betty, the oldest daughters, would deliver the cookies in the neighborhood on Saturday mornings using a child's wagon. For orders outside the neighborhood, John would deliver in the car. It wasn't long before people were calling the house to place their orders. When Marie turned 14, she got her driver's license and was able to free up more of John's time for baking, while she made the deliveries by car.

Towards the end of the depression, CWC was getting back to more normal working hours which meant John wouldn't have as much time to devote to the cookie business. By 1938 the family was making 600 to 800 dozen cookies a week! John couldn't keep up with both the foundry job and the cookie making. In 1938, he had his garage torn down and a small brick building was added to the back of the family home. The building had two large glass windows with an entrance in the middle, facing Larch Avenue. That same year, John quit his foreman's job at CWC and opened "Ryke's Bakery" at 367 E. Larch Avenue.



While writing this story, I had many memories flash back through my head. I grew up on Smith Street, a half block from Ryke's Bakery. I remember many times as a child, taking my allowance, entering the bakery, looking at all the wonderful, yummy, creations in the glass display cases, and trying to make up my mind what I wanted most...a frosted donut?...a lemon filled long-john?...a crème-filled bismarck?...how about a cupcake?...or maybe a couple cookies?...after all, my funds were limited, so I could only choose one.



One of my best memories of the Ryke family was the oldest daughter, Marie. Marie married Roy Borgeson in 1942. She and her two sons, Roy and John, lived across the street from us. I was 4 years old when we moved to Smith Street. The boys were much older than I was so I didn't know them very well. Who I remember is Marie, or should I say Mrs. Borgeson, because I never would have called her by her first name. She was one of the kindest women I've ever met. I never remember her not having a smile on her face, and a kind word to say, whether it was when she was working in the bakery, or if she passed you on the street. She even spoke to us kids...something many of the older neighbors wouldn't do because they thought they were so much better than us.

I didn't come from a religious family and my parents didn't have much money. In fact, I never remember us ever going to church. Mrs. Borgeson was a real Christian woman. Every summer I would look forward to her having "vacation Bible school" in her yard. Admittedly, I probably went at first because of the good treats she served (her working in a bakery and all) but also because of the kindness she showed this raggedy little tom-boy. Mrs. Borgeson was the first person I remember telling me about Jesus. Not just that Christmas was His birthday but that He loved me and would always be there when I needed Him...words that I keep with me even to this day. The same words that have brought me through some of the hardest times in my life and for that, I will forever be grateful.

Anyone who grew up in the vicinity of Ryke's Bakery remembers "free cookie day". Every Tuesday, on your way home from school, you could stop at the bakery and get a free cookie. What a treat! Kids would be lined up down the street waiting to get their cookie...no matter if it was raining or snowing...it was worth the wait. Oh...and on Halloween, if you were one of the lucky ones, you might end up with a long-john or donut, and not just a cookie. That's the kind of man John Ryke was, generous and kindhearted, values he obviously passed on to his children.

I guess you could say that if Johannes T. Rijke hadn't come to Muskegon, married Hendrika Den Otter, raised a loving, close knit, Christian family, started a bakery that was in the neighborhood where I grew up, I wouldn't have met his wonderful daughter Marie, and I wouldn't be who I am today. So, never underestimate the impact your life can make on another person, even a little kid.

Henrietta died on 17 August 1952 and John died 8 April 1967. The couple are buried in Oakwood Cemetery – only a few blocks from their home on the corner of Smith Street and Larch Avenue. Ryke's Bakery moved into the old Sanitary Dairy building on Terrace Street in 1967, and was owned and operated by Marie and her brother Henry, with help from their siblings whenever they needed. After Marie retired, Henry and his wife Ellen ran the business. It has changed hands over the years, and has more than one location now, but I still go back to the old neighborhood and to Ryke's on Terrace. Now that I have more than just a quarter to spend, I don't usually leave without a cream puff, along with a single piece of Bavarian crème marble cake, and a box of...what else...the best tasting butter cookies in the world!



Sources: ancestry.com, genealogybank.com (Muskegon Chronicle), Lakeshore Museum Center, History.com, en.wikipedia.org, mlpp.org, findagrave.com, Muskegon County Clerk's Office, and Hackley Public Library Local History & Genealogy Dept., Mlive.com, Sue Grevel (photo of Henry), and John Borgeson (family photos).