

## News from Nan

BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE, GENEALOGY, FAMILY HISTORY

# BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE: JOHAN/JOHN VAN RAAPHORST (ANNA'S FATHER, SEPTEMBER 19) (AI ENHANCED)

SEPTEMBER 15, 2025 | ANNA

*This post merges content written by me and published in this space through the years with recently produced context provided by AI Assistant Perplexity.*

The 129th anniversary of my father's birth (September 19, 1896) is coming up in only a few days. Happy birthday, Dad!

Johan (later changed to John, after he migrated to the English-speaking world) Nicolaas van Raaphorst was born in Amsterdam, Netherlands. He was the 6th and last child of Christiaan ("Chris") and Elisabeth van Raaphorst.



*My dad (the little guy) and his two next-oldest brothers, Harry and Willem*

Over the years I've written and published a lot about him and his family, especially the extended family's migration from the Old World to the New, first to Ontario, Canada, and later to the area around Detroit, Michigan.

I'm not going to repeat all that here, but rather focus on his life as a young teenager in Sarnia, Ontario, during the first few years after "crossing the pond." I've queried my favorite AI Assistant, Perplexity, to fill in some of the gaps of my own personal knowledge and experience. Thank you, Perplexity, for your research and insights!

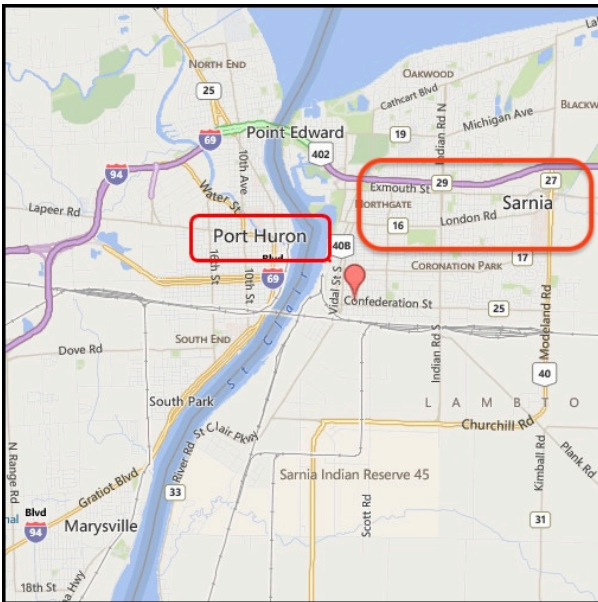
## John's migration experience: Netherlands to Canada



*John, shortly before he left Amsterdam*

From prior knowledge and research, I know that my dad, his older brother Hendrick ("Harry"), and his parents migrated to Canada in 1910. Dad's older brother Chris was already living in Sarnia, and was working for the Canadian government as an interpreter.

John and the other newly arrived van Raaphorsts joined Chris at 157 1/2 Front Street in Sarnia, which is located at the junction of Lake Huron and the St. Clair River. The following map shows both Sarnia, Ontario, and Port Huron, Michigan, where John lived later in his life.



Sarnia, Ontario, and Port Huron, Michigan

## Economic opportunity in Sarnia



Front Street, Sarnia, Ontario, in about 1910

I asked Perplexity to tell me what Sarnia was like in 1910. Here is Perplexity's answer:

“In 1910, Sarnia, Ontario, was emerging as an important industrial and transportation hub with connections to the growing oil and petrochemical industries, shipping, and nearby U.S. manufacturing centers. At that time, economic opportunities in Sarnia were largely driven by its location on the St. Clair River, its railroad links, and its early involvement in oil refining and other resource-based industries.

“Many Dutch families, including yours, were drawn to Sarnia for several reasons:

- Southwestern Ontario was a primary destination for Dutch immigrants during the late 1800s and early 1900s, thanks to available industrial jobs, transport links, and land for farming.
- The Canadian government actively encouraged continental European immigration, particularly skilled workers and those with experience in agriculture, crafts, or trades. Dutch immigrants were often recruited for these roles.
- Sarnia's economic dynamism and its role as a gateway to both U.S. and Canadian industries made it attractive for aspiring workers in industry and the trades, such as your father's later involvement in the auto industry in Detroit and Port Huron.

“Sarnia in 1910 was a booming, opportunity-rich location – ideal for ambitious immigrant families seeking upward mobility and a new start in North America, with easy access to industrial jobs in both Canada and the United States.”

## Life in Sarnia

Perplexity also contributed this information about the Front Street neighborhood where the van Raaphorsts first lived:

“There is no detailed record naming specific streets or neighborhoods where Dutch families settled in Sarnia in 1910. However, available research suggests that Dutch immigrants in early twentieth-century Ontario, including Sarnia, did not typically form dense ethnic enclaves but rather dispersed across working-class neighborhoods, often settling near industrial jobs or major transport corridors.”

Here is a description of the type of living accommodations they might have had:

“The address 157 1/2 Front St. in early 20th-century Sarnia would most likely have been either an upper-floor apartment over a main business or residence, or a rear/side unit.”

## John's first jobs in Sarnia

According to family lore, John's first job as a 13-year-old immigrant was cleaning spittoons at the Vendome Hotel, and later on he was a laborer at a wire factory.



*Vendome Hotel, Sarnia, Ontario*

Here is Perplexity's take on that information:

"It would have been very common in the early 1900s for a 13-year-old immigrant boy in Sarnia to work in service jobs like cleaning spittoons at the Vendome Hotel, especially as it offered basic entry-level employment with few barriers for youth. Spittoons (cuspidors) were found in hotel lobbies, bars, and public spaces, and keeping them clean was a menial but necessary task before smoking bans and improved public sanitation. For immigrant families, such "starter" jobs were a typical way for young teens to contribute to household expenses and gain a foothold in a new community.

"Afterwards, moving up to a laborer's position in a wire factory reflects the era's industrial realities – Sarnia supported a range of manufacturing (including wire and cable production) thanks to its strategic location and transport connections. This progression from hotel service to manual industrial work was common, providing on-the-job learning and increased wages as older teens and young men proved themselves.



*John in his late teens or early 20s*

“These early jobs, modest as they were, laid the groundwork for upward mobility, skill development, and eventual entry into higher-paying trades [he eventually worked as a die sinker] such as those your father later pursued in Detroit and Port Huron in the auto industry.”



*John (center, wearing apron) and colleagues, at work as a die sinker in Port Huron*

◀ 1896    ▶ 2025    ▶ AMSTERDAM    ▶ CANADA    ▶ MIGRATION    ▶ NETHERLANDS    ▶ ONTARIO    ▶ SARNIA