

Van Wyk, Case and Ellene: Flower Fields and Muck Fires ^[1]

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Case and Ellene Van Wyk: Flower fields and muck fires

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published . Copyrighted.
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I talked with Case and Ellene Van Wyk in the Dutch farming settlement of Terra Ceia. Located on broad, low plains beyond little Washington, [Beaufort County](#) ^[3], their community was once the southern end of the East Dismal Swamp.

The Dutch began to arrive in the 1920s. Many left the Netherlands in search of new farmland. Later immigrants were escaping from Nazi invaders or the devastation wrought by World War II. Deeply religious, they made a Dutch Reformed church and a Christian school the heart of the community.

A bold lumber baron, John Wilkinson, first dug canals into the swamp. Then, gradually, the Dutch settlers hewed out farms. They opened ditches, pulled stumps, and slogged through the "muck land." That dark black soil was so peaty it burned like hot coals and was nearly impossible to extinguish once kindled.

In the 1930s, the Dutch realized the "muck land" was also ideal for growing an Old Country crop: flowers. They sold bulbs and cut flowers as far away as Chicago and New York. Standing out against a landscape hard-bitten by the Great Depression, their tulip and daffodil fields attracted sightseers from across North Carolina.

Today, only a few farmers raise flowers, but I could understand those springtime pilgrims to Terra Ceia. When I left Terra Ceia, my car was loaded with daffodils, a gift from the Van Wyks, and my heart was brimming with hope and joy at the coming of spring.



Case and Ellene Van Wyk. Photo by Chuck Liddy, 2000. To request permission to use this photo, please contact the News & Observer.

Case Van Wyk: We went to first base a little place, on the edge of the swamp. Most people probably didn't think we were going to stay long. Times were pretty tight. The mosquitoes were so bad, they had to wear newspapers inside their jackets to keep the mosquitoes from biting them. They'd rub their hands on their horses' bellies, and there'd be blood dripping off the hand.

When you'd get an east wind, those saltwater mosquitoes would blow in here from Hyde County, them big, long, stripy-legged mosquitoes. Eat you up during harvest time! They'd last a day or two and then they'd die, and then there'd be the rain. Originally, this farm was full of cypress. They say it was knee-deep in water. It was landlocked. As soon as they opened up canals through the high part, we got our drainage. But it was all cypress.

The mules couldn't plow. The roots were pushing farther into the fields all the time. And the road was so bad, we couldn't use it. All the roads were dirt except for 32 and 264. We finally made a road to Terra Ceia. There was a cart path, but we couldn't use it. **Ellene Van Wyk:** My dad made the "muck shoes" for the horses and mules. He was the village blacksmith. The muck shoes kept them from slogging down, almost like a tennis racket.

Case: They were about the size of a dinner plate, and they were fastened to the mule's foot. A mule has a small foot. If the mule didn't have the shoe, then he sank up to his knees in the mud.

Her father built a lot of houses in Terra Ceia, too, but most everything burned up in the muck fires. The muck fires would burn under the ground and flare up here and there. They couldn't stop it, and it would burn a house up. The fire was burning. The sun would shine on a jug of water and set the land on fire, like a magnifying glass. You couldn't throw a cigarette down, it would sure take off!

You hardly saw the sun the first five years we were here. It was always so hazy and smoky. We called it "wonderland" back then- you wonder what's going to happen next!

When we moved down here, you didn't see a farmhouse that had any flowers. Most of them had a fence around the whole yard, and the chickens kept all the grass and flowers pecked off.

Ellene: You didn't have to mow. My mom made brooms from little trees in the woods, and just bound them together with hay twine. We had to sweep the yard every weekend. That was part of getting ready for Sunday.

Case: The mules ran around and ate all the shrubbery, too. There just wasn't anything growing around a farmhouse in those days. None of the houses had paint on them, either. The houses had hard lumber that didn't hold paint anyway. It was then Henrik Van Dorp got the bright idea of growing flowers. The muck land is a good black soil and it's easy to work. The peat doesn't dry out too quickly.

When the land first opened up at Terra Ceia, they tried to grow vegetables. That didn't work out, so some of the people left. Then the next time, they went to New Holland, over by Lake Mattamuskeet, and tried vegetables there and that didn't work.

Ellene: We had 120 acres of flowers on this farm. We had 40 acres of daffodils, 40 acres of peonies, and we had iris and tulips. When we first came here, there were also greenhouses that we had dahlias in, larkspur, all those kinds.

I really enjoyed the flowers. I loved working with the people too. They would pick the daffodils for a penny a bunch. They also did a lot of hoeing, and bunching flowers in the barn. It's hard work though. It was all done with your hands and bent over. I always looked forward to the daffodils, because yellow has such a bright sparkle, and to me that was the approaching of spring.

Case: So many people drove cars by Terra Ceia to see the flower fields on Sundays, that our cars were layered with dust. They even started a tulip festival in Washington.

Ellene: The Tulip Festival brought thousands of people to Washington. The whole county just swarmed to that event, because all these Hollanders were making a little Dutch country down here. I was a young child in school. Each school had a tulip festival.

Case: The Tulip Festival happened on Sunday, and we didn't believe in that much. When we came to Terra Ceia, in fact, there was a big controversy about farmers picking flowers on Sunday. My dad said, "No, you don't work on Sunday. You work on Saturday." But my dad never picked a flower on Sunday.

Special thanks to UNC-Chapel Hill graduate student Melynn Glussman for all her interviews in Terra Ceia, including her help with the Van Wyks.

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for a change](#) ^[4]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[5] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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