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## Curtis, Stanley "Doc" Oral History Interview: Holland Furnace Company

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STANLEY CURTIS

INTERVIEW: 25 JUNE 1986

Born in 1892 in Holland and worked for HFC in the engineering department from 1926 to 1957.

ON EARLY DAYS OF HFC:

"In the early 1900s when I was in high school, AH Landwehr and JP Kolla came to Holland with a (railroad) carload of wooden patterns to make cast iron furnaces. AH Landwehr was a salesman and promoter and a very energetic and ambitious man. JP Kolla was an expert foundryman and a genius. They were Protestants."

"Mr. Kolla set up a little cupola to melt iron and he proceeded to make a round cast iron furnace in sections of his own design. Most people heated their homes with stoves at the time."

"When Kolla began making cast iron furnaces, AH was a salesman and he went throughout the country selling furnaces. AH was a very good salesman, and their business grew and grew. What made it grow was their unique way of handling their business. Furnace companies had existed before, but all sold through dealers. But that wasn't AH's idea. His idea was to sell and install furnaces. He set up factory branches in the country from coast to coast. Through their means of selling they had a good name. They not only installed the furnace, they guaranteed it. They guaranteed castings for five years." Complaints were written to the Home Office in Holland.

"They had division managers who would have a whole state or twenty branches. He (the division manager) would supervise them and report to the main office."

"Through World War I and the 20s, they kept on developing and Mr. Kolla kept on developing new ideas in furnace lines. And they kept increasing their sales."

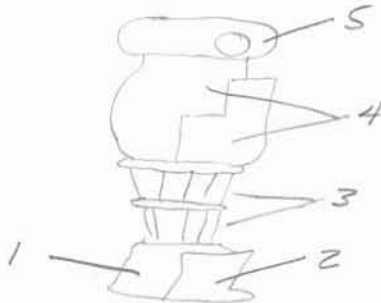
"That office got too small." Under JPK and AHL, HFC moved to a new office building in the 1930s. "That building was splendid. They really did it up when they built it. That was AH's planning -- to do it up right."

The office building "was air conditioned with a big spray

air conditioner using cold water for cooling. For heating we had eight of our big furnaces fired by coal, then oil and gas, and they heated the building."

"When the Great Depression came they suffered like everybody else, but not so much."

#### ON THE FURNACES:



1. Base plate
2. Ash pot section
3. Firepots -- where the coal is burned
4. Feed section and combustion section
5. Dome (doughnut shaped -- difficult casting to make)

The circular grate was Kolla's idea. It rotated to stir the ashes in order to keep the hot coal in the center. The castings were sectional -- put together with grooves.

"This is the furnace that made them through the 20s and into the early 30s."

"In the 20s after the recovery, Kolla had introduced a fan to work in the furnace, mounted in the hood on the top-most casting. (The Air-U-Well Fan) It was belt-driven by a motor on the side. That was quite an idea and they sold thousands and thousands of those. That was their first attempt at air conditioning." (?)

"They started selling conversion gas and oil burners to set in the ash pits of their old (coal) furnaces. They got into that later on, but what made them was the old cast iron furnaces."

"They did move away from it because they built these gas and oil fired furnaces with hardly any cast iron at all. They were built out of sheet metal drums welded, rather than cast iron."

The downfall of the HFC "ain't the fault of the equipment. They had gas-fired, oil-fired furnaces. They had all of that stuff without cast iron. That ain't what done them in."

#### ON SELLING IN THE BRANCH SYSTEM:

"The original sales contract that the furnace salesmen executed with the customer, he had to make a plan of the house on cross-sectional paper showing all the rooms, windows, doors, heights. Then he had to name those rooms he was going to heat on the contract. They agreed on a price and signed a contract." It was then sent to the Home Office. "The credit department looked at the credit end of it. And the engineering department had to check the plan to see it was correct. And if it wasn't correct we had to get in touch with the branch to see that it would get corrected or thrown out."

There were "drawers and drawers" of old contracts in the basement of the Home Office.

"Another inventive idea was the furnace cleaning business. They had great suction cleaners with great air bags and a high speed motor and a suction fan on a truck. They ran a flexible pipe to the basement and sucked dust out of the pipes. That was sort of a sales getter. It created quite a stir in the neighborhood. They used that as a sales getter. They shipped those trucks all over the country. They had a separate factory for the cleaner end of it."

#### ON REGULATING THE BRANCH SYSTEM:

"I didn't go out very often (to check on complaints). I remember one time they had three of use going out."

SC "traveled in New York State for one winter for almost two months, going from one branch to another" checking on complaints.

"Those salesmen were young fellows, anxious to make a sale. They were enthusiastic -- maybe over-enthusiastic. Once they made a sale, they got a bonus on it. They were anxious to make a sale."

The first time out was to Burlington, Vermont. Another time there was a case in Rome, NY. "There was a branch manager, and he had a couple where all of a sudden their Holland Furnace didn't work anymore. Some of these branch managers are so busy selling they don't service. So, I had to go with them on their job. The first thing I saw was two big German Shepherd dogs and the floor (around the furnace) was covered with dog hair all over." The filters were covered with dog hair and that was the reason the furnace wasn't working.

"It was usually up to the Branch Manager (to fix the complaints). If he didn't do it, then you went to the division manager."

"I remember one time at a place outside of Peoria, Illinois. One of those hot shot salesmen had sold a furnace to a priest in

charge of a Catholic Church in the late fall. They put the furnace in and it was coming toward the holidays. And they had to have heat. Please do something about it. It got so bad it got to the Home Office. Finally, the Home Office sent me down there. I went with the Branch Manager to the church. I found that the basement had windows all around the side and they were broken. The wind was blowing under the floor and it was colder than the dickens. I said first of all you got to close up the windows. . . ."

#### ON THE HOLLAND MAID COMPANY:

SC worked for the Holland Maid Company from 1924 to 1926. It hadn't changed its name to Vac-a-Tap yet. Holland Maid made a wooden cylinder(?) washing machine. Vac-a-Tap made a machine with flippers. "They changed the whole idea when they changed the name."

"The Holland Maid was a mess. The Landwehrs had invested in the company and it got to be a poorly worked-out machine. Some production people were milking it for all it was worth. They got a bonus for every machine that left the plant regardless of how good they were."

SC was "canned" from Holland Maid. AH Landwehr's brother Herman was salesman for Holland Maid and he got SC a job at HFC where he stayed until 1957. AH Landwehr's sister Selma married Carl GeSchwindt (Swift). "They didn't have it for him at the Furnace Company. So he promoted the Holland Maid and they were going to have factory branches just like the Furnace Company. Carl GeSchwindt started branches and those machines busted and went in for repairs. They went broke."

The person who built airplane motors in Holland got them started on the Vac-a-Tap idea for washing machines.

The Holland Maid Company was two buildings with railroad track in between. It was originally built as a German gelatine company.

#### ON WORLD WAR II AND THE NORTHSIDE PLANT:

"We machined armor plate for tanks. We made ship's anchor chains -- 90 feet lengths -- by a process of electrowelding of steel bars. That was for cargo ships during the war. That was during the 40s when we were pretty much shut down by furnace sales."

"The engineering department sure had our hands full. It was something different. They sent me to Pittsburgh to melt these 24-inch bars to melt to the required shape. Another fellow had to set up the electro-welding. It was all new. We never did it

before. We shipped out tons of chains."

The plant was used as a warehouse for parts after the war until it was sold to a dye-works.

#### ON PEOPLE:

AH Landwehr: "I thought very highly of AH Landwehr. He treated everybody very nicely at the Furnace Company. He was a do-gooder from start to finish. And he treated everybody right."

"AH Landwehr was a great promoter for the city. He was a mason and he promoted a masonic hall. He got that going, but it was too big for the local lodge to handle and they lost it. Another thing he promoted was the Warm Friend Tavern. He wanted a place for his sales conventions which he held annually there. He brought them in by groups, possibly sales divisions. That's why they built that hotel. There are two beavers on the top of the hotel. That's his landmark to show they worked like beavers to get that done."

"They used it (The Masonic Temple) as part of their initiation ceremonies. They lived in the hotel, but initiation ceremonies were held in the Masonic Temple. The division that took the big prize for sales was awarded a goat and they had a replica of that goat in the office building made out of cast iron in their own foundry."

SC says that Paul Landwehr's death caused AH's "downfall."

JP Kolla: "Mr. Kolla was a very strict person. He wanted his money's worth out of his expenditures. He used to live on the northeast corner of 16th and Lincoln and he used to walk up the railroad track on the way to the factory (picking up scraps of iron castings, etc.)."

"He was a tough man to work for, but if he liked you it was okay. For instance, he apparently liked PT Cheff, who was the son of a Reformed minister, who married Kolla's daughter and became chief executive officer of the Holland Furnace Company. He started in the foundry. He was one of these natural guys. He was a strong guy and he liked to work in the foundry. That appealed to Kolla." (Most likely, PT Cheff started out with the company as Kolla's chauffeur.)

Oscar Nystrom: "Oscar Nystrom was the designer of the Air-U-Well Fan. He was a favorite of Kolla. He was a Swede and he couldn't keep up with her (his wife Katie Kolla, JP's daughter)."

Eddie Landwehr: "He was a good-time boy. He was never serious about anything. I traveled with him on sales meetings. They used to put me with him to kind of hold him down."

Selma Landwehr Swift: was an office manager at HFC.

EH Sulkers: was killed in an auto accident.

ON WORKING AT HFC:

"I was treated very well there, regardless of who was running it. I never lost a day's pay. And I got raises too. It was a very good place to work, and the day I was 65, I quit."

Always worked in the engineering department. Victor Cherven headed up the department when SC started. He wrote the guide that SC has and showed to me. When Cherven died, Henry Weyenberg replaced him. "He was a very good boss."