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Oral History Interview with
Juke Van Oss

Conducted February 11, 1997
by Hal Franken

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Juke Van Oss
February 11, 1997
Interviewer: Hal Franken

HF: This is an interview with Juke Van Oss, and I am Hal Franken. WE are going to concern ourselves probably first of all, with radio station WHTC. In as much as it plays a very large role in Holland, WHTC, having gone on the air in July of 1948, and, except for the first few years, if memory serves me correctly, Juke Van Oss has been a part of WHTC all of those years. Probably within the last thirty-five plus years, very much with WHTC's "Talk of the Town" program, which has been the pulse of the Holland area. But rather than get ahead of ourselves... How did your career at WHTC start? Why did it start, and what are some of the things that have happened?

JV: Nelson Bosman was really the spark plug behind WHTC. He wanted to start a radio station, he had an electronic background in the service business, and he teamed up with Millard Westrate, who was on the board of Public Works. Nelson Bosman later became a member of the Board of Public Works, and of course later mayor as we know. They both were interested in electric equipment I think and getting a radio station started. Mr. Westrate said that he would be happy to go along with it if they could get someone else interested. So, they did interest Ted Cheff, Herb Marsilje, Willard Wichers, and Bill Butler. He was the last to join the group and there was some question I guess on whether they should get him into the group because he owned the newspaper. He wanted to also get Mr. French in, the owner of the

newspaper, but they, as a group, decided that, probably, would not be in the best interest of the radio station. I think we have to give them credit for going into uncharted waters, not knowing what was going to happen when they put a radio station on the air. Were they going to lose their shirt, were they going to make money, were they going to break even? I think, all being people who were not dependent on the income from all of their investments, felt that they wanted to do a public service more than anything to put this station in Holland. They went on that premise. They, I understand, each put in \$4,000, which at that time was a lot of money. They got a piece of property from the city between Central and College and 3rd and 4th Streets. They leased it from the city for a very minimal amount of money because it was nothing but swamp. The swamp was important because that provided a good ground system, necessary to a good broadcasting station. They had to go through all of the hoops of the Federal Communications Commission, and they engaged an attorney first of all to organize the corporation, The Holland Broadcasting Company. Then, they had to get a Washington Attorney and engineer to do a frequency search, and they had to buy equipment. The one great thing that they did was to buy the very best equipment they could. I think Mr. Westrate and Mr. Bosman probably had a great hand in buying Collins equipment which had a good track record during war time and who provided much equipment during World War II and they put out a super product for the broadcast industry, so we got Collins equipment and it served us well. It's still serving us well for that matter. Once they got the station construction permit, they had to organize a staff. Mr. Westrate, Paul

Hinkamp, and Bill Wilson wired the place. About a month after they went on the air, John Klungles joined the staff, and John was among the first engineers here also. Paul Hinkamp later retired to whatever he wanted to do, and Bill Wilson left for Texas and went back to school. My first day on the job was with Millard Westrate.

HF: And you came aboard as a first class engineer and as an announcer?

JV: I had been studying radio and obtained a second class license. At that time it took a first class licensed man to be on duty all of the time while a broadcast station was on the air. Whenever the transmitter was turned on, you had to have an engineer there. So, I saw and add in the paper, and I called up and talked to Sandy Meek, and he asked how soon I could get my first class license. I told him that I didn't know. He said that they would buy me a book of questions and answers that was available, and they did. I studied that book for a week, went to Chicago to the Federal Communications Commission Office and took the test. Because they were in dire straights for and engineer here, Sandy had called ahead and asked them to please give me the license as soon as possible. The engineer at FCC said that I could come back in about three hours and they would let me know what my score was. Well, when I came back in three hours, they gave me my license. The trip was a great success, I came back and I went over to Sandy's house that night and told him I had the license, and he asked when I could come to work. He said to come in on Sunday morning and that I'd be working with Millard Westrate and he broke me in on the board and how to run the turn tables. I became an announcer on the early morning shift. Mike Basket was also on the early morning shift as an announcer. He sometimes was late.

One time he was very late and the choice was that either I go on the air, or we were not going on the air, so I did it. It wasn't long after that that Mike quit the job, and I volunteered to work the first hour of the broadcast day, which was six to seven back then, as a combo man. I guess I was the first combo man in Holland. I was inspired to get on the radio originally to work for the radio by a man named Paul Gibson who worked on WBBM in Chicago. He had a talk show, not talking with people, but just talking. I always admired him, he would be talking and before you would know it you would be listening to a commercial, because he knew how to talk a commercial very well. Arthur Godfrey later did the same kind of thing. That kind of inspired me to get into the radio business, and the only avenue I knew was to get a technical license and I'd had a ham license and then I went for the additional study it took to become a first class engineer. That's how we got there.

HF: You've been with them now for 47 years?

JV: 45 years.

HF: In that 45 years there have been so many changes not only in radio, but as well as in the community. This was basically starting here in '48, going on the air. These were those great years right after World War II when so many things were happening. The veterans who were coming back had been back a few years, they were getting married, they were having families. It was just a time of excitement, and the community really started to change from that point on.

JV: There were barracks built on the parking lot at the Civic Center to house Veteran's and I believe there was also a second over at the tennis courts at Hope College where

Veteran's were housed at that time. They were temporary, but they gave the Veteran's time before they became established in their own home.

HF: You mentioned those who started the station had a stance of wanting to provide the Holland area with a radio station in what really was not a commercial effort, but more of a community effort to represent the community, to help unite the community, almost a public broadcasting station. In a sense, WHTC has never really lost that view or that posture of what radio can be to a community.

JV: True. And to my knowledge there was no such thing as public broadcasting at that time. One of the things they did at the very beginning when they had a frequency search, two frequencies were available in this area, one was 1450 the other was 1260, and they took the 1450 because they felt that they could broadcast the games at night seeing that 1450 was a full-time frequency, and 1260 was limited from sun up to sun down. They took the frequency that allowed them to stay on the air, and provide that avenue for broadcast of local sporting events at night. That was the reason that they picked that frequency.

HF: In the beginning, they went on the air at what time and signed off at what time?

JV: Went on at six in the morning and signed off at eleven at night. Unless there was a night game; if it went on longer, then we stayed on longer. I don't know that we ever stayed on all the time during those early years at all.

HF: Probably during inclement weather, and when civil defense and tornado season came about, then they would stay on until the warning was over.

JV: Yes. We didn't think much about tornadoes until a tornado hit Hudsonville in 1957

and it hit the lake shore out here. That made us conscious of tornadoes, and we became very tornado minded from that time on. We realized how much service we could provide by providing that early warning. I recall Bill Allen went and took a tape recorder to Hudsonville after that tornado and made a tape over there reporting about the Hudsonville tornado. It did a very good job of describing the destruction and the tragedy of over twenty people being killed, I believe, in that Hudsonville tornado.

HF: The station followed various kinds of things in a community effort, but some of the programming which included "Talk of the Town," but I think even preceding talk of the town weren't there other programs?

JV: We had a morning program that was aimed at women. It went on at nine until ten in the morning. When I started here, Jean Hill was doing that program. Jean Hill was also doing a children's program in the afternoon from five until five-thirty we called the "Storyland Hour," and we would take the imaginary Storyland Train to Storyland and Jean would read a book of some kind to the kids on the air, and every Friday was birthday day, and I believe when kids had reached their fifth birthday they could come in and she would sing with them and would devote most of the program to having these children on the air celebrating their birthday. That became quite a popular thing around town. We also had Aunt Bertha's program on the air at that time. We had an organ program on every morning, that was John Sweringa live at the organ. John would play from seven forty-five to eight o'clock every morning, and then from five after eight to ten after eight playing hymns. John was always very

popular. He did it from his home, he did it from Meyer Music House downtown, and we missed John when he left town, and went to seek his fortune elsewhere because he was a very popular organist. He had gotten his ground work at the skating rink in Virginia Park and he had the old Ken Griffin style of organ playing. We also had "Polka Time," every morning from eight-thirty until nine o'clock it was polkas. It was a good morning program with good music to pep you up and make you feel good. At eleven o'clock we usually started with the Zeeland hour which was more or less devoted to things in Zeeland. Nothing special but to appeal to the people in Zeeland and the sponsors in Zeeland as well. I think Hal Franken knows about that program in the First Michigan Bank building. As the bank expanded, however, they needed the room so consequently the Zeeland hour kind of dropped out. It was in 1960 that Bill Gargano had been here as an announcer in the early fifties and he left, went to Jamesville, Wisconsin, came back and he brought along the idea of the "Talk of the Town" program. Bill went on with the talk of the town not knowing what would happen, whether it would be popular or wouldn't be popular. We started and we got a sponsor right away. Paul Baker was the sponsor and he had his store over on, I believe it was 19th and Van Raalte, he became famous for cutting up meat for people in a grocery store there and it was the first Family Fare. Paul Baker's Family Fare. We miss Paul Baker, and I'm sorry to see that he couldn't live to see the success of his first venture. It would have been nice to have him do that. So, that started the "Talk of the Town" as it became popular and people accepted it, it became famous for recipes and it was a program unlike any other talk program on

any other station anyplace in the country or nearly so. People liked it and it's pretty popular today because of that, and because we discuss so many things.

HF: Today the station and Juke Van Oss are tied together as far as "Talk of the Town" is concerned and to our listeners. Could you name some of the guests that you've had on your program. We've had city managers, the Chief of Police, regular appearances by representatives and senators in the state of Michigan as well as on the national scene, we've had regular visits for the people from doctors. What are some of those names?

JV: Well, it wasn't called "Talk of the Town" at that time, but we did a legislative report on Saturday which I did with George Van Pursem and Clyde Geerlings, and George, at that time, was speaker of the house. Later, we had a program regularly with Paul Hillegonds who was also speaker of the house, so I've had programs with two speakers and Clyde Geerlings a very popular senator from the Holland area who once taught at Holland High School. He became senator and did a fine job as far as I know, and that was kind of the beginning of our associations with politicians and that kind of bloomed into reports from county officials, Jesse Dalman, who was one of the first county officials to be on our program regularly when she became involved in the county commission. We've had the sheriffs on, we've had the county clerks, county treasurers, all of the county officials. The name so to speak, the big names, I guess we can name some of those. I've had Tiny Tim on, Art Linkletter, Ishkabibble. If they were in town and someone would call and ask if we would like to have them on we would say sure. If we had the room we would be happy to have them on. The

talk show that started at noon was the first talk show, and that was something that Al Ackerman and I started not especially with audience participation but we had heard Ernie Simon and Jack Brickhouse in Chicago do a talk show and Jack, of course, did the sports while Ernie was kind of a gag man. So we figured maybe we could do something like that and we approached management and they said well, try it you know, and we did. Before that we had only had fill music at that time. So, we did and we talked about inane things and we talked about the sponsors, which was very popular with the sponsors. We talked about things that a lot of sponsors might not accept, but the sponsors that we had very much accepted it. I think one of the first sponsors we had was the Wade Drug store who stayed with us through all of the years that they were in business. One way or another they advertised with us. We advertised for automobiles. And we would just talk about them, sometimes we would go visit the sponsors and see what they had in the store so that we could talk about them with some degree of knowledge. They appreciated that I think. That's what made it a popular show. After Al left, then various people joined me. Jack McCalley and Hal Franken joined me a few times, Hal Valkema, Chuck Anderson I think was the last one that was on the program with us and at that time we just kind of let it die at some point. The popularity of the "Talk of the Town" just kind of took over from there.

HF: The "Talk of the Town" has also been instrumental in whenever elections and millage issues, because it serves as something of a sounding board as to how people are feeling about millages, elections, people running for office, and this has also been

very much a part of WHTC and "Talk of the Town."

JV: When elections come around, if people want time on the air, we give them time on the air, and they must realize that their opponents are given that same courtesy.

When they come on the air, I try not to be obnoxious with them as some talk show hosts may be, but I feel that they should have a chance to tell their story, and I let them do it. I ask them why they're running and what they would like to see different in government and that kind of thing, and I let them tell their story, and if their opponent tells it better, well, maybe that opponent will be elected. I think the other station WJBL had it's conception right here in the control room of WHTC. In 1956, John Klungle was working here as an engineer night time, and Bud Groysen and Len Ver Schure would stop off occasionally, they were both deputies for the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department, and I guess they started talking about the possibility of the other station. John of course knew that the 1260 frequency was available, so he and the two deputies decided to have a go at it. And they did, and that's how the other station was established in Holland. That also is a part of the radio history of Holland. That has had many changes in programming just as we have, somewhat, since they provided a service to Holland as well. At the time, we couldn't possibly fathom that another station could exist in Holland because of the competition and vying for the advertising dollar, but I don't believe that there ever has been a real battle on that. There seems to be enough for both.

HF: One of the interesting things started to happen in the late 50s and early 60s. That was that television was really coming in, and there was a feeling that radio could just

about fold, because television would be taking over just totally. Of course, we know that radio had a bit of turn in direction, but radio, across the country is stronger than ever as far as a number of stations and what they're worth and all that. You went through that as I did. Any thoughts on that, as you reflect, as to that time, where we are today, and what we see in the future?

JV: I think that radio today is now primarily for information more than entertainment. Entertainment is television's thing. They do it well, and as far as music goes, Mr. Butler was thinking of an FM station in Holland, and he gave up on that idea because he got into this group. When TV came in FM just practically died, but later it was brought back with the possibilities of good music. The FM's today enjoy a great popularity and there is very little difference as far as ratings, as far as FM stations go and AM stations go. Radio today is information primarily, and people tune in for information. They tune in for the weather, they turn into the news. Let's face it, TV is not a local thing at this point, and they can't get the real local news. A good example of that would be the night of the Hudsonville tornado, I happened to be watching TV, and living out near the red barn at the time, I heard the weatherman say that there was a possibility of a tornado. It wasn't about a minute later that my neighbor was on the back porch saying to get down in the basement there's a tornado coming, and the tornado was just off to the west of us a short distance. There's always that difference of twenty-five miles which makes a large difference in the weather. We do have the edge as far as keeping people up on the weather is concerned, I think, rather than listening to a T.V. station. That's where radio can

shine. Let's face it, if somebody loses their dog, where else can they call? They can't call a radio station in another town or another radio station in another town, they have to call a local radio station. There will always be that place, I guess, for local radio that can perform those very local services and we're doing it I think. We have been doing it over the years. This station went through some changes that I guess over the years we've always had the theory that people were here to learn, not to stay. Maybe those of us who have stayed don't know any better, but consequently radio is not a high paying occupation. That discouraged a lot of people from staying who could have been a real asset to the staff. Many people went on to become staff members at other stations and get into the high paid market like Bill Allen, Al Ackerman and some of these people that did move along and moved into the so-called big time, at least as far as we were concerned. So, we remained a small station, and the pay is always commensurate with the size of the station to a degree.

HF: Is there anything else that you would like to say about the station?

JV: I think that Holland has grown to accept the station as kind of the anchor station. We are the pioneer station having been on the air all of these years. They can usually depend on us for keeping up on things, particularly sports. We do a monumental job on sports. There were many times that I recall when we got our FM station, back in the early sixties, we were sometimes doing three games a night. We would put a game on live on AM and another on FM and tape a game to play back on AM after the other game. This meant sending out three broadcast crews that may have to travel twenty-five to forty miles to get to the game, and that meant putting a lot of men on

the road. We accomplished it usually without too much problem, though sometimes the facilities at the away games were less than plush. I think that as far as local news goes and local weather, the local stations do a good job.

HF: What are your roots as far as Holland, your family, how did it all start for you?

JV: Well, my grandfather came to Holland in 1869, at the age of twenty-two. I'm not sure what the process of his work life was at that time, but I do know that he cleared land for Dr. Van Raalte out on East 8th Street. He went to work on the railroad for a while, but he quit that because they wanted him to work Sundays and so he quit the railroad, and eventually wound up on a farm out near Castle Park where he raised his children. His wife, my grandmother died at an early age when my father was only six years old. So, the older sister raised the younger children, and my grandfather never remarried. That happened when he was in his fifties and he lived to be ninety-eight. The farm is still in the family near Castle Park, my cousin lives there at Centennial Farm. My other grandfather, Meyering, lived out on Beeline road, south near the Gibson area and those were pretty much my roots. Most of them came from the Netherlands at one time or another. My grandfather, Meyering, came over when he was five years old. I guess we're based in the Netherlands. My grandfather Van Oss came from Hermeld in the Netherlands, and I'm not sure where the Meyerings came from, but someday we'll track that down I guess. My parents lived around here a great deal of their life in Laketown township. My father worked at various places around town. He worked at the Holland Furnace Company in the early twenties as a draftsman, he was self-educated with a correspondence course in drafting. When

things got slack, they decided to put him in the tin shop, and he decided that he would rather not do that. So, he quit. He told me that was one of the big mistakes in his life was quitting the Holland Furnace Company. But, he worked at Keppels and he worked at Reliable Coal Yard, and various places. He worked at some of the lumberyards around town. My mother never worked, she was a house wife. That was her job, and it was a very important job, too, as it still is today. In 1937, I got my first job working on a vegetable wagon with my cousin Harold Elders and Clarence Elders. Harold would go to the Grand Rapids market in the morning with the truck, buy the vegetables, come by our house at six o'clock, pick me up, and we would go over to my cousin Clarence's place, get the truck set, and take off for Saugatuck and Douglas and hit the lake shore with all the vegetables. Every Friday we would take orders for chickens and that was my first job and I got a dollar a day. On the way home, we would stop at Bill's Place, which was a bar on the way home near Saugatuck, it's now a different place right at the corner of the old Saugatuck road and the highway. We would usually get a hamburger and bottle of pop, and that was the rest of our pay for the day. I would get back home at about 3:30 in the afternoon, and that was my first job, summer of 1937. Then I started Holland High School, and into my sophomore year of High School, my dad took a job down in Dowagiac managing a farm for a man named E.G. Swanson. And so we had to move, and we were there three years in Dowagiac, and I finished my schooling there. Consequently, I have two class reunions to go to both Holland and Dowagiac. It was a good education for me, I think, probably getting away from Holland and seeing

what the rest of the country lives like. After we moved back here, I worked for a while at Dunn Manufacturing until I went into the service, and I spent three years in the service in the Phillipines and Korea. Then, I came home and didn't know exactly what to do. I went to work for Weller nurseries for a while in the office, and that's when I got interested in radio.

HF: We're dealing with Holland, but we're also dealing with the community area, and very much a part of our community area has been Saugatuck. We mentioned Saugatuck because you spent some fifteen years living in Saugatuck, and not just living there, but you were a part of the school board, you were on the City Council, and then became mayor of Saugatuck. Are there any tidbits that you can share with us on those years?

JV: Well, those years we were raising our children of course and we had been living on 32nd Street and had a chance to move into a farm house which we thought would be great for the kids. It was also great for snow in the winter. So, our kids started school in Saugatuck and so I became interested in the way the schools operated and I talked to the superintendent and he encouraged me to run for the school board, which I did. I was on the school board for nine and a half years there. Meanwhile, we moved into Saugatuck, into the village, and I was urged to run for the village council, which I did and I lost. The next time I ran, I made it. The way it happened was that I became village president for three years and I also served on the Lion's Club and the American Legion and the Chamber of Commerce and I was going to meetings a lot in Saugatuck. At some point I said this is enough, let's pass the torch to the

younger generation and let them have it. I have pretty much absolved myself from any type of government since that point, except to vote.

HF: And to interview people in the government. You lived near the Red Barn Theater and sometimes used to offer housing...

JV: We did offer housing. We had a large house and so, consequently, the director, Jim Dias, and his wife and children stayed at our house the first year that they were here. Then some of the actors stayed with us, and I saw one of them later on some of the TV programs, so they went on to bigger and better things than the Red Barn, but that was a good learning experience also. Every Monday night we did a kind of "first-nighter" at the Red Barn. I would take the equipment and we would hook up to a line there, and we did a half-hour program from the red barn before the show actually went on, so that was a kind of interesting experience as well. I was even in one of their plays one time; my first and last acting experience.

HF: The community really liked theater, and the Red Barn was probably one of the first ones that they started to go to on sort of a regular basis in the summer time.

JV: It brought professionalism to the theater, we were used to high school plays, and as much as we enjoyed them and seeing our youngsters act, I think that this was some professionalism and it gave us a kind of off Broadway feeling, I guess, and a lot of the musicals, too. They did a fine job on them.

HF: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

JV: Well, I guess I've enjoyed living in the Holland area. I've always considered it a nice town. We always come back to it. I guess what amazes me is that people who

have been away from it for ten or twenty years, when they come back, they are amazed, also, at the way that it has grown. This is both plus and minus. As a city grows it needs more services, you have more crime, you have more of everything. At one time, I could name all of the doctors in town, and if you look at the list of doctors available today to us, it's just staggering, and that is just one effect of growth. If you look at the hospital and the way that that is growing. When I was first in the hospital, I think my grandmother was there for a goiter operation, it was just the little brick building right up front. There have been a lot of changes, but it is still basically a nice town. It still enjoys a lot of that hometown feel and flavor. If we can continue that, there will be more progress I'm sure. Maybe we should seek a little less growth and a little more culture in the area.

HF: Well, I think that you have given us a little thumbnail sketch of the radio station, WHTC, where it started, how, why, and some of the things that have happened. Also touching on your roots just a little. We're delighted that you could be a part of this project for this very special year. It was just a few days ago, February 9, that supposedly Van Raalte chose this area, and he did so when there was a lot of snow. Today it's snowing 150 years later. We still have the snow, we still remember Van Raalte as a founder of our community. But we also have many, many other memories. And I know there are a lot of other people that have very special memories of Juke Van Oss and WHTC's "Talk of the Town." Thank you.