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Bratt, Hero Oral History Interview: Dutch Immigrants who Emigrated to the United States after WW II (non-immigrant)

Donna M. Rottier

Interview with
Hero Bratt

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by Donna M. Rottier

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Subject: Elderly Holland Citizens

DR: Could you please state your full name?

HB: My full name is simply Hero Bratt. I was named after my grandfather who emigrated from the Netherlands.

DR: And your current address?

HB: My current address is 124 West Thirtieth Street in Holland, Michigan.

DR: Your date of birth?

HB: My date of birth is May 5, 1910.

DR: How long have you lived in Holland?

HB: I have lived in Holland all my eighty-two years, except for seven years when I was teaching school in small towns outside of Holland, in Northern Michigan and in Chicago. All except seven years were spent in Holland, Michigan.

DR: Could you relate some of your earliest memories of living in Holland?

HB: Yes, my earliest memories go back to roughly age eight or nine. One of my earliest memories is the First World War. I recall very distinctly that as a little boy, I attended meetings in which the public burned in effigy the man we called Kaiser Bill, whom we held responsible for World War I. I do recall that. I recall as a little boy that my father did not have a basement under his house, and that it was necessary to dig a basement under the house, done by horses who pulled and dragged the dirt out from under the basement. I recall some little things in my childhood that way.

DR: Did you help out with the basement?

HB: I helped out by following my father as he walked through the

basement dragging the dirt from under it. There's another recollection I have of the First World War, and that is that my father, who had already at that time four children, was about to be drafted into the armed services. When we received the draft notice, I remember the gloom that fell over the home, and how we all wept and mourned. My mother was all upset. Fortunately, the war was over before he ever had to be engaged in service.

DR: Did you know other people in Holland personally who had gone to the war?

HB: Well, no, I was too young to have any association with these older people. I do remember one distinct thing, though, about it. During the First World War, Hope College got involved in the sense that part of the campus of Hope College was used as a training grounds for boys who were getting ready to go overseas. I recall lying in the bedroom on a summer day when the windows and the doors were all open, and hearing the bugle at five o'clock in the morning calling the men to the "reveille," to wake up in the morning. Those were some of my distinct recollections of Hope's involvement in the First World War. Of course many students from Hope College did get involved in the war.

DR: Do you remember anything of the aftermath of the war?

HB: No, I only recall that after the war was over, I was coming to the time when I had to go to high school. That's what people called the "Roaring Twenties." I remember when girls started to get their hair cut. They got all kinds of haircuts called sometimes "shingles" and other sorts of forms. They got it cut quite short to look like

males. I also recall distinctly that at that time the girls were called "bobby socksers" because instead of wearing long stockings they wore short socks which were called then bobby socks. We were in a daring time. Girls that were somewhat daring were called "flappers." I recall a lot of these things very distinctly.

DR: What were your reactions to some of those things?

HB: My reactions to that was fun. I always thought it was fun to watch. I didn't feel a bit judgmental about it. It's the way the ball rolls. Times change and people change, although there were things at that time going on that were a little distressing sometimes. The drop in moral values that I sensed at the time. That I recall, but I was only a lad. I didn't make judgements about it; I just thought it was fun to watch.

DR: Was that the general consensus in the community?

HB: Holland always has been quite a conservative community. Being conservative meant that religious values played a very large role in the lives of the people, and they played a large role in my family, too. My family had very strong moral code, and we were taught in our home to be respectful of one another. We were taught not to shout at one another, never to use rough language to father and mother, to be respectful in school, and if the word came out that we had not been respectful, we were soon taught that this was improper. That was the way the community, I think, reacted like almost all communities do. [Interruption by doorbell] Our moral values were very much set by our religious beliefs, and those were very determining in our lives. We weren't preached at. We weren't what

people would call conservative in the sense that we had no understanding of what was going on around us. But we did have a pretty good sense of what's right and wrong, and in that way we were spared lots of problems that I think modern kids are going through; that nobody's telling them that anything is ever right and wrong, and creating for them great problems of judgment.

DR: What church were you raised in?

HB: I was baptized in what is now called the Pillar Christian Reformed Church. It's a church on Ninth Street and College Avenue. I have belonged to that church all my life, and still belong to it, except for the seven years when I was teaching school outside of town. My entire life has been devoted to teaching. I have taught forty-five years, and eight years part-time after forty-five years. I have taught at every level of education--elementary, the bulk of my time was spent in high school. I have taught in Holland Christian High School for thirty-five years, and I taught for eight years in a special course they had there called "American Culture." I've had a very broad experience in the educational world.

As far as the Pillar Church is concerned, that is of course the old Van Raalte church. It was built in 1856, on the corner of College Avenue and Ninth Street. It has a long, long history, and when I moved toward retirement, I decided that it would be a very interesting avocation to study more of the history of my church and of the town that I lived in. I asked permission of what is called the consistory of my church to read all the old minutes of the church, back to 1850, which I have done. I learned to read Dutch.

They are all in Dutch, up to 1920. I have learned to handle the Dutch language so that I was able to read what Dr. Van Raalte himself wrote in those minutes, about the problems that these early settlers wrestled with, and the developments in that church up to the present time, but that's a long story all by itself.

DR: What sort of general developments did you see in the church in reading those minutes and in having been involved in the church your entire life?

HB: The earliest minutes reflect the Dutch background of these people very strongly. They reflect the fact that these people that came here as immigrants were not only Dutch speakers, but that they wanted to retain their Dutch culture. I have noticed in reading these minutes, that Doctor Van Raalte was really quite progressive in the sense that he early on understood that the Dutch people could not get along in this country without learning the English language. He advocated not losing the Dutch culture--he wanted to retain that as best he could, and the Dutch language--but at the same time making his people capable of handling themselves in the New World. That reflected itself gradually as efforts were put forth to have more English for the young people in the church. The church has always been rather stable, rather conservative, although, in my viewpoint, not nearly as conservative as a lot of people think it is. Many people link the passing years with conservative--that is, older people are conservative, younger people are radical. In my viewpoint, that is not true. There are many younger people who are more conservative than a lot of older people I know. The church had

the same experience over the many years. The church has undergone several transformations. It started out independently, thinking that it could still belong to the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands. That proved not feasible. Then it became joined with the Reformed Church of America. Mr. Van Raalte also then started Hope College as a college of the Reformed Church of America. Then, in 1884, it became what is today called a Christian Reformed church, so today it is called the Pillar Christian Reformed Church, although for many years it was known as the Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church. As far as the procedures, the doctrines, the teachings, and the ways of the church are concerned, it pretty much followed the American pattern of all churches. It was very difficult in the early years to get enough English so that the young people could be held in the church, and wouldn't follow the temptation to run off to churches that had the English language.

DR: What sort of changes have you seen happening in the church during your lifetime?

HB: In my lifetime, I think tremendous changes have taken place. One is, for example, the stiffness and the formal quality of worship in the church has changed considerably, so that there is a great deal more freedom of activity on the part of the audience in the church service. There is a great deal more music than there used to be. In the early years (this is of course long before I was born), they had no organ in the church. They never had a real pipe organ until around 1900. After that, of course, the organ led in the services, but before that, it was a man who stood up in front of the group and

called off the right note, and everybody tried to fall in line. That was the way that went. Now, there is much more freedom. There is much more music, there is a great deal more liturgical action in the church. The people are responding. There is just in general a great deal more freedom. But necessarily in a church which has been here as long as this one has, the basic elements still remain virtually the same.

DR: What do you think has caused those changes?

HB: I think part of the reason for those changes is just simply the fact that society changes. It's much more freedom. The Hollanders, coming over from the Netherlands, were used to strong authoritarian ministers. Dr. Van Raalte was looked upon by some as sort of a demi-god, and by others he was looked upon as a rabble-rouser, a man who gave difficulties because he was so progressive. The democratic tendencies in American life have also made themselves felt in the church, and also in this church which is a very old church. Democracy means that the people have much more voice in what's going on. The people are much freer with their minister. They call him by his first name, something absolutely unheard of in the days of Van Raalte. If anybody in Van Raalte's time would've called out to Van Raalte, "Al," I think that everybody would have thought that there is something wrong with his head.

DR: Do you think that the church is changing as fast as the Holland community in general?

HB: Yes, I think so, although the Holland community, in general, in the last fifteen or twenty years, has radically changed. With the

introduction of a good number of Latino people, of people from Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Laos, people from China and Japan in smaller numbers. But the large number of immigrants, not really immigrants, but people from Mexico, and from Cuba, and now lately from Southeast Asia, has changed the nature of the town. Holland has become now a more or less large, small city--characteristics of a large city with a smaller population. In my lifetime, things have radically changed. If people came back from the dead, people who died around 1920, 1930, they would feel very uncomfortable in this culture. They would feel very uncomfortable with the looseness of it and the freedom that people exercise, and in many cases, lack of restraint. It seems to be, that that is a remarkably big change and it is changing the mores and the morals of the community, too. It's inevitable. I'll give you an example of it. When I was a child, Sunday was quiet in this town. It was very quiet. Sometimes children became bored by the quietness of it and young people didn't know what to do with themselves and broke the mores by doing things the public didn't approve of. That situation is now over, and the seven days are virtually the same. I have been in Europe, in 1970 and in 1984, and I noticed that in Germany, for example, in the smaller towns, virtually everything is still closed on Sunday, in comparison with our town, where some of the bigger stores and malls are freely open on Sunday. Those are changes that have taken place.

DR: How do you feel about that?

HB: Personally, I don't like it. I'd prefer a stable community, progressive in the sense that the people are employed, happy, busy,

doing good things, improving their schools, backing up their college, and this sort of thing. I do not like the breakdown of standards. This bothers me, and I think that a lot of young people suffer because of it. They have to make judgements when I never had to make those same judgements when I was young. I didn't have to decide what was right and wrong. I knew.

DR: What do you think should be done about that?

HB: I don't know. That is a very difficult problem. How, in a democracy, where freedom is exalted so highly, and where everybody is so proud that he can do what he wants to do, how responsibility can be reintroduced into such a society is, to me, a very difficult problem. As an older man, I have taught school many years. I did not want to be authoritarian. I did like it, though, when the youngsters respected my position, and permitted me to do what I wanted to do--teach them--and didn't bother me too much. That's my feeling about all of life. I think that where you have a stable situation in a community, you can do what you want to do, and everybody then becomes free, but where stability goes, crime comes in, and then we get such foolish things as boys getting together at night to destroy property, and vandalize the community, and terrorize the dear people who want to walk out in the evening and don't dare to because somebody's going to hit them.

DR: Have you seen an increase in crime in Holland during your lifetime?

HB: Yes, particularly in the last ten years. Part of that is attributable to the fact that the mores of the community, in distinction from morals now, the customs and habits and the ways of

the community, have been quite radically changed by the introduction of many foreign elements into our society. It's getting more difficult, and I have taught always in a Christian school, but this is in the public school system, this becomes very difficult because it's so hard to find uniformity or some central focal point of agreement. That makes things hard, particularly for young people. Then they gang together and try to find fellowship with each other when they don't find it in the society in which they live. I feel bad about that. I think those young people are very unhappy, so they do things like these wild things in Los Angeles and Detroit. I read about this in the papers.

DR: Do you think the public school system is responsible for that?

HB: No, I do not think the public schools are responsible for that. The public school system is the outgrowth of an ideal, and the ideal is simply that every American must learn to read and write, and must know how to carry on his daily business, and must, at the same time, learn how to be respectful. No, I don't think the public school system is responsible for that. I think the public school system has got a very great problem on its hands, because it has to accommodate to a very mixed culture, and when a mixed culture prevails in any society, you have problems, because people don't know, they can't learn from each other how to think. They have to figure their own way, which for many people, is quite fatal.

DR: You said you taught in a Christian school. Why did you decide to teach in a Christian school?

HB: My grandparents came from the Netherlands on my father's side. In

the Netherlands, in the late nineteenth century, there was developed a Christian school system, as an alternative to public education. That movement came over with the immigrants in the late 1890s, 1900s. My parents carried it over into this country. They were convinced that the public schools had a very great problem, due to the fact that everybody had to be accommodated, and it was impossible to introduce much of a strong fundamental religious tone in the education. This bothered them deeply. They started a system of Christian schools in this country, in which they were entirely free to exercise their religious beliefs as they wanted to. I was brought up by my parents that way. My parents were the kind of people who didn't say, "Well, little boy, you can go where you want to go." They said, "You're a little boy, and you're going where we tell you to go." But they didn't do it that way. They were very kind and decent about it. That's how I got introduced into the Christian school system. I graduated from Calvin College; that was my denomination's school, and I began to feel very deeply that there was indeed something fine that could be done in Christian schools, so I found myself a job teaching in a small, rural, Christian school up in Northern Michigan, which I did for seven years. I enjoyed it very much.

DR: Where was the school?

HB: That was in a little town near Marion, Michigan. That's near Cadillac, Michigan. These are small villages. This was a strictly rural school. So my first seven years, I learned rural culture, immigrant rural culture, and enjoyed it enormously. Then I moved on

to Chicago, where I saw the contrast, right in the inner city of Chicago, in an area called Roseland. I taught there for one year, and I saw what effect the large city has on young people. That was the first time I ever saw policemen come to school, and take away youngsters who had vandalized or done something during the night. Then I came to Holland, and the rest of my career was spent here.

DR: How did the experience of having taught in a very rural setting and a very urban setting affect you when you taught in Holland?

HB: My experience in a rural setting was of course that the people tended to be far more, well, a little warmer. I was taken in as an unmarried young chap. I was taken into the homes. Every Sunday I had a meal with somebody from the school. The general warmth of the situation I look back at that with great pleasure. It was just wonderful. When I moved on to Chicago, I was taught by these people (I was only a small-town boy myself, and I had been in the country teaching) they said in Chicago, the main thing is when you get downtown, don't look at anybody. And don't look up at the big buildings, either, because they'll all know you're a greenhorn, and when they know that, you may get slugged across the head and your purse taken away from you. I thought this was a very interesting introduction to big city life--nobody knows anybody, nobody cares to know anybody very much, everybody is lonely, it is an independent outfit, everybody is rushing down LaSalle Street, downtown Chicago, and nobody cares who the other person is. If he drops, everybody looks momentarily and wonders if he's had a heart attack, but who cares anyway. That was different, and when I came to Holland,

Michigan, I found much of the same thing we had in a rural setting. It was a kind community. It was a stable community. It was an active community. Hope College furnished many things of cultural value to the community. I found this to be a very lively community in spite of the fact that some people thought it was so conservative that nothing exciting was ever going on here. There were many, many cultural things going on, and that is, now, as I am getting older, that is increasing. Hope College has furnished many cultural advantages to all the people of the town. They're available, to anybody. So we have now symphony concerts, and Great Performance Series, and these are all a little more recent developments--very beautiful.

DR: How did you feel growing up in a Christian school system in Holland?

HB: I felt that it was very valuable in a sense that there was in the Christian school a strong sense of identity--you knew who you were. When you looked out from your vantage point, you were in a better position, probably, to make some solid judgements about what's going on around you. That is what I liked about the whole Christian school movement. I had the disadvantage of being sometimes looked at a bit askance by the community because it was separatist. That has been always one of the problems in this community, is the idea that some people don't want to participate in the community, so they do something all their own. I'm being pretty frank with you.

DR: Do you think that these feelings have become worse?

HB: No, I don't. I don't think that has become worse. I think that, as a teacher, the problems in public education have become very much

intensified due to the fact that we have now such a mixed culture, and I think that makes education in the public schools more difficult as time goes on. There is, even among administrators and school boards, not a very strong sense of identity. Who are we? The only thing that I perceive in our day, is that people use the words freedom and liberty so loosely, almost as if it's just a question of "I feel good, because I can do what I please," which is not my code. I think I do what I must do because it is good for everybody else and for me. As far as I'm concerned, the basic thing is God in all of this.

DR: Did you ever encounter any difficulties with the community teaching in a Christian school?

HB: Really not. I have served in the community in many capacities. I have never really felt that very strongly. I do think that there is some feeling among people in the community, that anybody who sets up an alternative school system, such as a Christian school system, is in some sense not loyal to the community. I have sometimes sensed that there are people who think that. However, my conviction is, over all the years, that the youngsters that we have turned out in our particular Christian high school have been fully as community aware as anybody I knew. We had lots of good nurses, and lots of good lawyers, and lots of good doctors, and lots of good ministers. And that can be said for the community in general, too.

DR: Do you think that an education in a Christian school is possible for anyone in Holland who wants it?

HB: Well, that's becoming more and more of a problem. It becomes mostly

a financial problem, because obviously any institution that is not tax-supported runs into problems when the people who support it have to pay public taxes of their own besides. That's a very difficult problem. It tends that way. However, at the moment, nobody is turned away because of lack of money. There are ways by which this is financed. That's much like private colleges like Hope College and Calvin College furnish scholarships for people who can't afford to be there, and a goodly number of them share in those scholarships, which is a very wonderful way to help everybody get, if he wants that particular thing. But there is a tendency that separate schools can become elitist, and only for people with enough money. That is not the kind of school I have taught in. I have never dealt with elite. The only elite I ever dealt with were people who had a strong sense of identity, and who cared about the community and who cared about themselves and their kids.

DR: Do you think there's danger that the Christian school system in Holland might become more elite?

HB: There is positively that danger. It's a real problem, but it's no different from a problem of a private religious college, because in it too, the tuition's become almost unmanageable. Pretty soon these colleges become almost like Harvard and Yale, where you can't get in with less than twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars tuition. For your ordinary person, that isn't a very good place to go.

DR: You mentioned earlier about students' respect for their teachers. Through all of the years that you taught school, what sort of changes did you encounter in that level of respect?

HB: As far as I personally was concerned as a teacher, I think I have said previously, I expected all my students to respect me as a person, and to treat me as a teacher, to let me teach. I, on the other hand, always wanted to treat them like worthy human beings who really wanted to learn something. On that basis I was always able to get along well with them. I never encouraged students to make a plaything out of me. I didn't want that. I didn't, on the other hand, want them to stay away from me either, as if I was a big authority figure who knew everything. I always told them I didn't know everything. There are a lot of things I don't know, but they don't know either. So we'll learn them together. It was always my code that there is no way we can learn anything if nobody knows the difference between right and wrong. There is a difference and the right is always the better way, and it always gives you more satisfaction, and I therefore never had much problem in my own career with that sort of thing. On the other hand, in the general atmosphere of schools, there is now vastly more freedom for students, and the authority of teachers has diminished greatly, which means that no teacher can go into a classroom now, and just simply assume that it's going to be all right. They have to learn all kinds of techniques for trying to keep things stable enough so somebody can learn something. I never went through that. I am a strong believer in fundamental education, fundamental, basic, not in the sense of dry and dull, but in the sense of interesting, and exciting, and important. In that sense I have always tried to hold my students to it, and I think they've respected that. I think

they've wanted it. I wanted my students when they left my hands to be equipped to go on all the rest of their lives learning, whether in college or anywhere else.

DR: What have you observed to be students' attitudes themselves toward Christian schools?

HB: I don't think that student's attitudes have basically changed. They have only changed in so far as society has changed. Students are no different from the society around them. If the society around them breaks down and there is no longer the kind of respect such as I see, for example, in child abuse and that sort of thing. When that happens, then youngsters act that way, too. I hold a brief for young people. I think that the young people I taught, I just saw many of them with strong ideals and very fine attitudes and I just don't think people have changed that way, but society has. The tragedy is that many young people, and part of what it means to be young is to be immature--you haven't seen it all yet and there's an awful lot to see before you die, and it just seems to me that in view of the fact that young people are immature, that society has an obligation to be thoughtful about them. Not hurt them, to allow them freedom, but not to treat them as if everything they say is necessarily God's truth. There are all kinds of ways of seeing things. That's my view of young people. I think that young people are wonderful.

DR: Do you see the Christian school system in Holland growing in the future?

HB: I think that it will grow somewhat. I don't see an explosion in it.

I do see that the public school system all over the country, and that certainly isn't only local, faces very great challenges. I have tried to explain to you what I consider to be one of the basic problems, and that is the cultural mix, which is not easy to handle. I feel sorry for people who have to handle it, because as soon as you interject any note of authority in a mixed culture, you run into horrendous problems, because there are so many people who disagree. When so much disagreement goes on, you lose identity, and when you lose identity, you don't believe in yourself anymore.

DR: How do you feel about the growing diversity in Holland?

HB: I think it's inevitable. I don't see how it could ever be stopped. I don't think it would be desirable to stop it. I do think, though, that we have to give credence to new groups coming in. I think they make their own contributions. I think, for example, the Southeast Asians give great leadership in education. It's amazing how they learn the English language, and what progress they make in our culture. I do think that we have to respect the culture of those who don't understand. Latinos must try to understand the Dutch, and the Dutch must try to understand the Latinos, and so forth. That's how I feel about it. There isn't much you can do about that, and I wouldn't really want to change. I don't think that I would care to change it, and I don't think you can change it. We're living in a world that has exploded. I can take an airplane from here to Amsterdam and be there tomorrow morning, like nothing. Then I bring my culture over to Amsterdam, and that's the way the world is now. That's the way Holland is now.

DR: How do you think the Holland community has responded to this increase in cultural diversity?

HB: Well I think fairly well. I feel a little disturbed about it that people who come in from outside it, for example, from Cuba and Mexico, feel that the Americans have to accommodate to their particular way of thinking. I, for example, have a strong feeling about bilingualism. I think that it's good to know two languages, particularly if one of them is your native language and the other is going to be your native language. You know both. I think both cultures have something to contribute, but I think it is a vast mistake for anybody to think that he can get along in this culture and remain a foreigner. It just does not work. And so he gets unemployed and so he gets into difficulties, and so his children don't get proper education, and the first thing you know, we lose them, and then we're unhappy, because we have gangs around town trying to find some identity.

DR: Have you seen that sort of thing happening in Holland?

HB: Somewhat, yes, in the last five to ten years, there is a very distinct problem. When I grew up in Holland, people did not make entertainment for me. My friends and I always made our own entertainment. We had to have no gymnasium. We played basketball outdoors. When we had time off from school, in no time at all we had organized our own baseball game. Nobody, no teacher, had to stand and tell us how to do it. I think that is a colossal loss for young people in our day, that they always seem to need adults to help them. When I was a youngster, we were allowed to do our own

thing, but never did we have to rely upon older people who knew how to keep us in order. We kept our own house in order.

DR: If you can think back to when the first major influx of new immigrants came to Holland, do you remember what the response of the community was?

HB: The first response of the community as I recall it, and this is partly from my own church's viewpoint, everybody felt very concerned that these foreigners coming in here would be lost. That is, that they would get so mixed up that they wouldn't be able to be employed, they wouldn't know what church to go to, and in general they would be looked upon as second-rate citizens. I think there was always a concern in this town about that, and I think there still is. I never have felt that outsiders were treated as second-rate citizens. The Dutch, when they came here (my grandfather came to America in 1867 with his brother), found his way into society in this country. We found our way in, we asked no particular privileges, we asked no bilingual education, we simply assumed that we had to learn how to be Americans when we were here. At the same time, my people were very conscious of the fact that their European background, their European culture had something very worthy about it, and we therefore must not throw that aside. I have a strong feeling that when a large part of the population is, so to speak, alien for a while at least, until they get acclimated to the new country in which they're living, that those people must be very careful not to lose the cultural advantages they had in their own country. At the same time, they must be very thoughtful of the fact

that in a practical sort of way you can't live in another country without learning its language. If you fail to do that, you will surely pay the price, and your children will pay the price in terms of crime and a lot of other things because they have no identity. They don't know who they are, they don't know where they belong. Those are some personal feelings I have about these affairs.

DR: Many of the recent immigrants didn't come here voluntarily. Do you think that caused problems?

HB: My people, my grandfather and his brother who came here in 1867, came here looking for opportunity. They did not come for religious reasons. They did not come because of persecution. They really didn't come because of poverty. They came because they saw this country as a vast open door of opportunity, and they made good use of it. Their family got along very well with that. There was no sense of compulsion. There was a strong sense of adventure. Arriving in New York, for example, being able to speak only Dutch was quite an experience, and coming all the way here and finding a farm, and then finding a wife. For example, my grandfather, after whom I am named, did not have a wife when he came here. He waited until he was thirty-five, and then went across the ocean to find a wife in his native country, and came back with her and a little girl that she had by a previous marriage. So you see, all of these things indicate that these people had not forgotten their old country. At the same time, they did not want to go back to it either. No way did they want to go back. They thought that their opportunities in this country were just too precious and they were

very happy here.

DR: How do you compare that experience to the experience you see of these recent immigrants?

HB: I think that the recent immigrants are many of them coming here because they see almost endless opportunity still, but some of them are driven by poverty, so many are driven by utter poverty. For example, the people who are leaving Haiti now on these boats and being driven back to Haiti, are coming here out of desperation. To them, this is no venture, no adventure. This is life; it's bread, bread for the family. Many people coming across the border in the Southern part of the United States, the route crossing the Rio Grande, are only crossing it because they have to have something to sustain their families. That's the new type of immigrant. Vietnamese were fleeing from Communism. The Laotians were fleeing from Pol Pot, this terrible fellow out there who's just simply a Cambodian man who's killing everybody in sight. So many Europeans came here for the simple reason that they just couldn't make it in their own country. I think that has changed. There's more compulsion.

DR: Do you think Holland has a place for these people?

HB: I think they should be just as welcome here as anywhere, but I just think that there is a certain price you pay for that, and the price you pay for it is the difficulty in finding a new identity. We had some Laotian people who joined our church, and to everybody's shock, they refused to sleep in a bed. They slept on the floor. The bed was standing there, and they all slept on the floor. Everybody

wondered what's this for. Well, at home they always slept on the ground. Well, okay, we all thought that was very strange. So they had to learn. Now they're still buying rice by the one-hundred pound bags, because that's their native food. Well that is the thing that's happening now. These people are coming here, not really so much by free choice as under compulsion. My people didn't come under compulsion, really. I think that Dr. Van Raalte's people did not come under compulsion either, except that some of them had been persecuted--the Dutch government had been very thoughtless about how they dealt with these people who happened not to think the way they thought.

DR: When these people do come under compulsion, do you think it's fair to still expect them to learn the language and to become more a part of this kind of society?

HB: Well, with regard to the language, I believe that it is not only fair to expect them to learn that, but it is for their own advantage. There is no way that these people can survive in a culture where they are unable to communicate, because, as a long-time teacher who taught in the English language all his life, I have a high regard for language, and I think it's the lifeblood of human communication. If you cannot communicate with another person, you're so to speak sunk, there's no way you can get along with him. You can be kind to him, but you can't really understand him. On the other things about the cultural manners and mores and even the morals of these people, in my view, there is no such thing as an American way of doing anything. I think that's a composite of all

kinds of different things, and in view of the fact that there is nothing uniquely or distinctly American, I think it's very unfair to expect people to conform to that. If you want to be Dutch, be Dutch, but at the same time, if you don't want to learn the English language, you will not be able to communicate with your fellow citizens, and then you will be lost.

DR: Do you see people in Holland reaching out at all to learn about the cultures of new people who are coming in?

HB: I think that's a real problem that you raise. I don't think that nearly enough effort is being put forth to understand that. If it has to do, for example, with such fairly trivial things as people not showing up on time for a meeting, those are fairly trivial matters although they can be troublesome--a kid coming to school at 10:00 instead of 8:30 because that's what they do at home--but, on significant things, for example, in the Latino culture, the family unit is pretty strong. There are men in the Latino culture who very much cherish the macho image. I think that's an undesirable aspect of that culture. I don't think that's very good for a man to have the right to hit his wife, or to pound around on his children because he's boss. On the other hand, there are so many wonderful, warm things in that culture which should be appreciated by people. [Interruption by phone] There are those good things about that culture, there's no question about it. It isn't so much a culture as it is an attitude toward life that we're concerned with. I think that there is a great deal of warmth in those families that is enviable. That looks good to me. On the other hand, as far as

Americans are concerned, and the Holland people are concerned directly with the Latino population, I think that they should make more of an effort to find out who these people really are. It is my firm conviction that one of the problems in American society is that people don't learn to know each other well enough. The result is that with lack of information and knowledge, indifference creeps in--I don't care anyway, what's the difference to me what happens to that person. To me that's an unspeakably bad attitude to take toward your neighbor. I think that the Latinos are our neighbors and I think that in no way should they be discriminated against, and I think that one of the important things this area must learn is how to give fair employment to these people so that they don't have to run around and feel as if they're not in it, as if they're not acceptable. Nobody ever should be a second-rate citizen, no immigrant, no Dutchman, no Latino. Everybody ought to be accepted fully. But it's harder to carry out those things than to talk about them.

DR: If we could switch gears a little bit, could you tell me a little bit about your experience at Calvin College?

HB: Yes. When I graduated from high school, many students did not go to college. This was in 1927, when I graduated from high school. My father urged me to do it. He wanted me to go to college. I was very happy to accept that. I had a sister who had gone through college and also became a teacher. My father had high ideals of education, although he had had very little of it himself. Calvin College opened many doors of opportunity for me. It was a good

college. I think it was in many ways similar to Hope College. It had identity. When you went to it, you were accepted as a person who was valuable to them. It had a very fine academic quality, much as its sister college in Holland has. My experiences were very good. I came at a time in 1927, 1928, 1929, when there were a rather large number of gifted people who were in my class. They were writers, some of them of national repute, as for example, Meindert De Young, the writer of children's books. He was nationally recognized as the winner of a National Book Award. His brother, David Cornell De Young, Peter De Vries who wrote for the New Yorker for many years and authored seven or eight books, and the head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Michigan was in my class. These were all immigrant young people who had found their way. Their parents had encouraged them to read. I enjoyed college very much.

DR: What sort of opportunities were opened for you at Calvin?

HB: For me, I had an insatiable desire to learn. I thought that my vision was much too narrow, and I wanted to learn a lot of things. The doors were opened and it so happened that I started college two years before the Great Depression struck. That came in the fall of 1929 when the stock market broke. When I had gone to college a couple of years, I ran totally out of money, I had no way to finance anything further, so I sought a job teaching, and I got this rural job. I enjoyed that very much. While being in that rural community, I could take advantage of all that I had learned at college and carry on my education by myself up there. It was the

Depression that really made me aware of the fact that this country was living almost too much by its economics and not enough by something much better. We were simply thinking that because we were riding the crest of prosperity, that we were just "A-ok." I found out we weren't just "A-ok." I learned when the Depression came that there's something much more vital in the world than big success with money, and that's the value of human beings and their relationship to God, as I saw it. That's a pretty basic thing. That's how the Depression came. The Depression experience, that's a very crucial thing in my life. When the Depression came, well, my family were plain people. My father was a carpenter and lived from hand to mouth. We never had much money, but we were never poor. Nobody would ever use the word poverty for our family. We didn't have poverty, we just didn't have much money. But we had no poverty. When it came in 1929, when that Depression hit, it hit disastrously hard all over. Everybody got hurt by it. So I went to teach school. My first salary was one-hundred dollars a month for nine months. That's nine-hundred dollars a year. That's very little money. I had not taught more than two months, in 1929, when the stock market broke. Then my salary went down, and it kept on going down, until roughly around the 1940s when the war came. Then things really began to change. But during that time of poverty, I experienced what a lot of people experienced in this country, that if you have bread to eat--enough to satisfy your physical needs--and you have some books to read, and you can give some money away even, you should have every reason to be very happy and very thankful. To

me, the Depression was a very valuable experience and I'm glad it happened.

DR: Do you think a lot of people experienced the realization of those kinds of things?

HB: Yes, I think so. I think that in a certain sense we are now going through much of what happened prior to 1929 and the Depression. We are riding so high, and using money so freely, sometimes almost wildly, that the American character is being effected by it. We think that only people who make big successes are worth knowing. That isn't my code. The Depression taught me that whether people are successful or not, they're worthwhile, every one of them. That sounds kind of like idealism, but in my sense of values, that was one of the valuable things about the Depression. The one thing that hurt most was that some people suffered physically from it. Some of them didn't have enough to eat, and that was tragic. Some people committed suicide because they saw no future in their life, and so they killed themselves, which was always very tragic. Among my people there was no such despair. It was just poorness, not poverty.

DR: How did Holland recover from the Depression?

HB: When I came back to Holland to teach school in the 1940s, early in the forties or late thirties actually, Holland was recovering like everyone else. Holland is a different community in the sense that it is more conservative economically, too. Only recently has a new note been introduced into this community, but there always has been sort of a mores about work in this community--not to let your dreams

exceed reality, that there is such a thing as the real world you are living in. Holland's been that way over the years, and it has made it a very stable community. It makes it a desirable community for other companies to come into and employ workers whom they can trust, who won't be absent every other day because they have been on a drunken binge or something like this. So Holland was rather standard, I think, in its recovery. A lot of people have a wrong conception of this town anyway. They think it's fuddy-duddy, old, old place, quiet on Sundays. They ought to know the truth of the matter is that things have changed a great deal.

DR: Was that change something that took place very gradually, or was it something that happened quite suddenly?

HB: In my view, it happened fairly suddenly. I think the last ten years, fifteen years--that's sudden. Anything that really takes a transformation in ten or fifteen years is quite sudden. I may be too many years old. I like stability. I don't like sudden changes. It's hard to accommodate to them. Holland has undergone a rather radical and drastic change in the last fifteen years, in my viewpoint.

DR: What do you think is the biggest factor in that change?

HB: The biggest factor is the fact that the outside world has started to pay attention to us, and when they do that, they want to move in, and when they want to move in, they bring with them strange customs and strange habits. That means that the community has to make an adjustment to this. for example, I very much dislike commercial activity on Sunday. I can't for the life of me see why everybody

has to be made to work on Sunday when he ought to be home with his family. I'll give you a little illustration of that. I was on the Herrick Library Board in Holland here for eleven years. When Mr. Herrick gave this library, I was on the committee of regulations--when it should be opened and what sort of things we should do. My committee, Mr. Hinga and myself, and I forget who the third one was, talked about whether or not we should have the library open on Sunday. We discussed that at rather great length, and then Mr. Hinga, who used to teach at Hope College (he was a very lovely guy), Mr. Hinga said he thought that Sunday was the most wonderful time for kids to be with their parents, home, or riding, or be with you parents, talk with them quietly, have a good day to learn to know your kids. I liked that very much. I thought Mr. Hinga was right on the ball. Not that there is anything wicked about having the library open on Sunday, but the general sense he portrayed of the importance of families and having a little quiet time when the wheels stop turning, and you just sit and read and dream and talk and eat and drink and ride a little while. That was his dream. Now that has changed. It's a different world.

DR: Do you think it's becoming a better world, or are there hindrances to that?

HB: I don't know, better, worse. What bothers me is that in this modern world, so many people are lonely, they are so much alone. Even when they are with other people, they're lonely. They aren't communicating together. They're not seeing in each other what's really valuable in other people. This bothers me in the modern

world. Better, worse, that's worse, very distinctly worse. And it leads to all kinds of problems for psychiatrists and psychologists and medical doctors. Stress, this whole business of stress is very very much more than in my day. I didn't know as a young man in my home what stress meant. When somebody got sick, we got stressed a little bit, but we didn't know what stress meant. Our parents were quiet. Modern society generally is a very stressful society, and I think that's the worst side of it. The better side I guess is that people have much more freedom to do what they want to do--go to Arizona, Florida, Europe, anything you want to, except for a very large part of the population that does not share in that. I don't think that's better. It's worse. People sometimes say, "I'd like to leave the world a little better than it was when I came into it." Well, maybe, but I don't think in such general terms. I think in terms of particulars. I think in terms of my friends. I think in terms of people who are sitting there all alone in nursing homes, nobody to talk with them. I'm thinking in terms of Latinos who can't manage their youngsters sometimes, and Dutchmen likewise who don't do a good job of it. Life is very personal. You can't really improve the world; you can only do your thing. Now you're hearing something of my personal philosophy of life.

DR: In what ways besides teaching have you also been involved in the Holland community?

HB: The biggest thing I did for the Holland community was to serve on the Herrick library board for eleven years. I did that, and I enjoyed that very much. I was very fortunate because when I came to

the library board, the library was on the second floor of the city hall. It had a very cramped quarters, and it had a wonderfully energetic librarian whose name was Mrs. Hazel Hayes. Mrs. Hayes was looking for money to get a new library. I just came on board, that board, at about the time when she was making her effort. She had a contact with Mr. Herrick. Mr. Herrick liked what he read of her letter. He looked it all over and he decided to give us $250/300,000 dollars to build a new library. At that time that was more money than it is now. I was fortunate to go through the whole process of establishing this new library, which is now being expanded shortly. It's going to be much larger than it is. That was one of my more fortunate involvements in the community. Outside of that, I have done a great deal of work indirectly for the community and for my own church. I've served on my church board for many many years. I've represented our classis in Holland here on denominational-wide boards a number of times. Those are all community involvements.

DR: What was it like to live through a time when so much technology was exploding?

HB: Technology always frightened me. I thought that technology was wonderful for certain superficial things that you could gain from it. But the deepest realities weren't even touched by technology. It just made things tough for people. You had to learn all kinds of new things. It frightened me and I always had to feel that technology had to be kept in its proper place. It's good for this physical world we live in. It's nice for medicine to have a lot of

machinery with which it can replace your joints if they have to be and all that sort of thing. Factories with their technological improvements. All of that was very interesting and exciting to watch. But I don't know that it made life better. I can't see that. Personally, my view of computers is that far too much emphasis is placed upon them. I think every youngster ought to learn to use them like he used a typewriter. It's nice if certain people become very skilled at it. But to think that a computer can replace human thinking is, to me, very foolish. Computers are machines and I think that our modern world suffers very much from heavy emphasis on machines. So that instead of seeing the doctor, you just simply see his machinery. He doesn't have time to talk with you.

DR: How did technology affect Holland?

HB: Oh, well I think, very much so. In recent years, in the last fifteen or twenty years we have a number of companies who have been exceedingly progressive with technology. We have big companies like Hayworth and Herman Miller in Zeeland and a number of machine companies that are really very progressive. I think so. But as a school teacher, it never came very close to what I consider to be the important thing. If you could read well, and discerningly, and could think straight, I'd treasure you as a student. And we learned together.

DR: I don't have any more questions. Is there anything that you would like to address that we haven't addressed?

HB: No, I think not. I just think I've talked too much. No. Holland

as a community has been very interesting to watch. I do recall when there were interurbans that ran from Holland to Grand Rapids. I rode those interurbans when I was a boy. I was a newsboy in this town when I was in high school, and I met a lot of important people downtown selling newspapers in the morning, and delivering them in the evening. I used to meet the morning train that came here first in 1870, and when I was a lad, around 1914, that train came and carried my newspapers. I remember those things very distinctly. I remember when this town, when where you are now sitting, on West Thirtieth Street, was all country and suburban. Only in the last thirty or forty years has this been developed into residential property. I've watched what everybody sees as the explosion of everything. Everything has exploded. Knowledge has exploded. Technology has exploded. Wealth has exploded. The population has exploded. We are living in an exploded time. That's very difficult. And that's one of the reasons why we can't find much stability in politics or economics or morals, why kids have to find their identity somewhere else than in their home. When I was a kid, we weren't bored. We just did things. We could go where we wanted. I could get on my bicycle and go five miles out to Lake Michigan and go fishing. Sit there, a little lad with a fishing pole in my hand, for two hours, come home with a nice mess of fish, and that was fun. And it was simple fun. it didn't cost anything, just a little leg muscle.

DR: Thank-you very much for your time.

HB: Oh that's alright. It's been nice to talk with you.

Interview with
Hollis C. Wells

Conducted July 25, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The African-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: I will ask you a list of questions that I will ask everyone I interview. You can feel free to talk about them as much as you like. This is Donna Rottier. The date is Monday, July 25, 1994, and I am interviewing Hollie Wells in his home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

HW: Hollis C. Wells.

DR: Thank-you, and your current address?

HW: 13761 New Holland Street, Holland, Michigan.

DR: And your date and place of birth?

HW: May 12, 1914. Philadelphia, Mississippi.

DR: Thanks. How long has your family lived in Holland?

HW: Roughly about fifty years.

DR: Could you begin, then, by describing a bit about growing up in Mississippi and your life before you moved to Holland?

HW: I didn't grow up in Mississippi. My people left there when I was two years old. I grew up in Arkansas, Missouri, and Chicago, Illinois. I left Chicago and came to Michigan in 1943. I didn't stay in Michigan, however. During World War II, I went out to the state of Washington to work for Kaiser Shipyards, and from there to California. When the war was over, I came back to Chicago. I couldn't find any place to live, so I came back here on the farm. That was in 1947.

DR: What did your family do?

HW: My parents lived in Missouri. My mother passed away first, and then my father.

DR: How old were you when you moved into Holland?

HW: Thirty-five, I guess, about thirty-five.

DR: Did you go to school in Missouri or Chicago?

HW: In Missouri mostly, yes.

DR: How much school did you have there?

HW: Just out of high school.

DR: What was your first job out of high school?

HW: You'd be surprised. I was a night porter at Dumez Restaurant in Chicago.

DR: How long did you do that?

HW: Until the war started, then I got a better job. I worked at the shipyards. First of all I had to learn to weld. I went to school and learned how to weld. Then I went to work at the Pullman Shipyard in Chicago. No, first I went to work at Jones' Car Manufacturing in Gary, Indiana. I worked there for a few months. Then they closed down, and I went to work for Pullman Shipyards in Chicago. I worked there for about a little over a year, and then I went out to the state of Washington where I worked for Kaiser. Then to California and I worked there until the war was over. Then I came back to Chicago, and from Chicago back here.

DR: Did you have family or people you knew up here before you moved here?

HW: Yes, I had a family. My wife at that time said she couldn't take this kind of a living. She was born and raised in Chicago and she couldn't take it. She went back to Chicago.

DR: When were you married?

HW: In the war I married the mother of my two sons. Ray lives here on 136th and David lives in Grand Rapids. I was married to her about twenty-two years, then she kicked me out. I built this house here and then the girls' mother and I got married in 1972. When my wife left, I got a job with General Motors in Grand Rapids, at the stamping plant. I worked there for twenty-six-and-a-half years, driving back and forth. In the meantime, I cleared the land and I planted blueberries. I worked at that twelve or fifteen years while I was still working at General Motors. When I came out, retired, I put full-time into blueberries. It was hard work, but it paid pretty good.

DR: Do you still do that?

HW: No, I sold that in 1982. Now I guess I would consider myself retired.

DR: What sorts of things have you done since you retired?

HW: Interesting things?

DR: Anything. Are you involved in any community organizations or activities?

HW: The church.

DR: What church do you go to?

HW: Calvary Baptist.

DR: How long have you gone there?

HW: Thirteen, fourteen years.

DR: Did you go to another church before you started going to Calvary Baptist?

HW: While I was working in Grand Rapids, I attended a church there. After I quit work there, I said there was no point in me driving all the way to Grand Rapids for church. I associated myself with Calvary Baptist in Holland.

DR: Were you raised in a Baptist church?

HW: Yes. My father was a Baptist minister.

DR: What do you think of Holland as a community?

HW: Now, or then?

DR: Both. First then, when you came here.

HW: It wasn't much. Everywhere that is community living now in shops and businesses was all farmland. I bet there weren't a dozen buildings on 136th between here and Holland when I came here. I've seen a lot in development for businesses. They kind of like being here. The only job which was available to me was the tannery which has been replaced by this chemical facility on River Avenue, right on the Black River. The Black River comes into Holland and it turns into Lake Macatawa. Right on Lake Macatawa, Parke-Davis. There was a tannery there originally and I could have worked there, but I didn't feel I could take that kind of

work. I looked in Grand Rapids and got a job at General Motors. Other than that there was no work for me in Holland. That's why I went to Grand Rapids to seek employment.

DR: Why was there no work available? Was it hard to find work for everyone?

HW: There was work here, but none that was appealing to me. It was usually rough work with low salaries. I looked for something a little better. I drove all the way to Grand Rapids all alone twenty-six years.

DR: What do you think of Holland now as a community?

HW: It's beginning to look like a community now, with all the new businesses that have come in here. Of course, now, with the new business, you draw in another element. The people who commit crimes, they come right on in with the business. It's better in one respect and it's worse in another.

DR: What do you think can be done about that?

HW: I don't think we can actually do anything because the Bible says that man will get worse and worse and worse. The way I feel about it, there's nothing we can do about it. The Lord Himself will have to deal with that when He comes.

DR: Do you think that it is getting worse in Holland?

HW: Oh yes.

DR: In what sorts of ways do you see that?

HW: I think I remember when the first murder was committed in Holland. I believe that must have been back in the late forties. I don't remember the incident. I just remember they said it was the first murder. I might have that wrong, but as I understand, it was the first murder committed in Holland. It might have been over a period of time, or it might be the first ever. I don't know which it was.

DR: Have your children gone to school in Holland?

HW: Yes.

DR: What do you think about the education they have gotten here?

HW: My two sons, they finished at Holland West Ottawa. My youngest son, he's in business for himself. He has a repair shop, repairing automobiles. He does very well at that. My next son, he lives in Grand Rapids and I don't know just what he works at.

DR: How do you think your children's lives have been different living in Holland than they would have been had you raised them somewhere else?

HW: Holland has a better influence on them, I believe, than if they had been raised in Chicago. At that time, they were shielded from a lot of the wrong environments had they been in the city. Like I said, I think they were fortunate to be brought up in a community like this.

DR: What do you feel about Holland's image as being a traditional Dutch community?

HW: The image of Holland has changed so much since I came here, it's hard for me to keep up with it. So far, when you know the history of the Dutch people, then you can understand most of their actions. Most of the things they do are from tradition.

DR: Do you think Holland is still a Dutch community?

HW: Yes. It's changed, but slowly.

DR: Is that change good, bad?

HW: Some good, some bad.

DR: What would be some of the good aspects?

HW: Well, in their way, they're very religious. I wouldn't say I approve of all their actions, even toward religion, because they say there is none right but the Dutch. And you know that isn't true. A lot of them, they have slowly changed that attitude. They don't think as much that way as they did two years ago. The community, I think, as a whole it stands for most of the right things. They still have those prejudices, that in most communities you have to learn to look beyond that.

DR: What sorts of prejudices, for example?

HW: They have racial prejudice.

DR: Have you ever felt discrimination or prejudice against yourself in any way?

HW: Oh yes.

DR: In what circumstances?

HW: I remember one time, I stopped by the Mercury place in Grand Rapids to have some work done on my car. I left, and one of the workers there was going with me. He was going to take me home and bring the car back to do the repair on it. A Mexican couple was driving just from one side of the street to the other. I finally turned around, and in doing so, in his zig-zagging, he hit the rear-end of my car. We stopped, talked about it, called the police. The police, I don't know why he would take their side, because I had a witness to verify the way this man was driving, but he sent me away. Afterwards I got a ticket in the mail. I don't know. I never did anything about it because I knew it was useless to try to justify myself, because I couldn't justify myself to the police even though I had a witness. That is just one incident. Of course I know there had to be others, but that one is always vivid in my mind because it was so unjustified.

DR: Why do you think people act that way?

HW: That's a good question. I guess it's part of their bringing up, part of their heritage.

DR: How has that kind of discrimination or other kinds of discrimination affected your family?

HW: We have learned to be hardened to that kind of action, try to live above it.

DR: Do you think that you come across any different amount of discrimination living in Holland than you would anywhere else?

HW: No, I doubt it. In some cases Holland is more open to that than other places might be.

DR: How so?

HW: It's in their nature, I guess. They being who they are, think that nobody's right but the Dutch.

DR: What do you think about the growing diversity in Holland? For example, there are more and more Asian people moving into Holland and more and more hispanic people moving into Holland.

HW: I think it's good and bad. When the crowds move in, there's all kind of people as well. When the blacks moved to Holland, came to Holland, more people, they had to get people whoever they could and they didn't know who they were getting, who they were bringing in. So they would bring in the undesirables with the other folks. You can't charge this to who brought them in there. They had to have people to work, and they didn't know exactly who they were getting.

DR: What do you think that sort of diversity means for Holland as far as the community goes?

HW: How does this element of people affect Holland? I couldn't say it was for the good; it would have to be a negative effect, because this element of people they do nobody good, not even themselves.

DR: Why is that?

HW: I can't say why, I guess. I haven't had the experience of dealing with them that much. Why they do these things, I can't say. Who

can say why a person would deliberately murder another? There's no reason at all. I can't understand it.

DR: When you came to Holland in the forties, how much ethnic diversity was there then?

HW: They treat you right on the surface, but they might have other intentions beneath.

DR: When you moved into Holland, how many other African-Americans were living in Holland?

HW: None, that I knew of.

DR: How many are living here now, do you have an idea?

HW: Now? I have no idea. You might wonder how I happened to chose this place to live. When you live in Chicago, it's a big thing at that time to have a farm in Michigan. Our original result was Ohio. I went there lots of weekends. On the weekend, a lady was wanting a ride back to Chicago. We were talking about farms and what-not. She said, "I know where you can get one." She said, this man, in Holland, he's married to a black woman, and she was discontent because there were no black people around. If he would sell part of the farm to some black person, she would be more content to live there. I talked to the gentleman. He said, yes, he would like to sell. We closed the deal on the farm. His wife never came back to town. I think that was just an excuse for her to get out.

DR: Why have you stayed in Holland for as long as you have?

HW: Well, my roots are all here now. I wouldn't mind leaving Holland, if I knew someplace to move. I could live in a warmer climate. At my age, that would be beneficial to me, but my roots are all here. If I could possibly sell this place for what I figure it's worth, I wouldn't mind leaving Holland. Because at my age, you don't enjoy getting up and wading through the snow in the cold weather. I feel that my health would be better from that. I have been fairly physically fit, consider I think I am. The climate doesn't seem to hurt me physically, but maybe I would have a better mental attitude if I was to get away from here.

DR: Who did you sell your blueberry farm to?

HW: To a young couple. His father had been in blueberries. He had died, and I guess that's why he decided someday he had to have a blueberry farm.

DR: How big was your farm?

HW: About thirty acres. You can see it here, all the way back to where you see those trees, that was the end of our farm.

DR: Have you ever regretted selling it, or getting out of the blueberry business?

HW: Oh, no. I'd been in it at least about forty years. That's long enough to stay in most any kind of business, especially when you have to work hard at it.

DR: If you were going to tell people who were going to be reading this interview one thing that they should know about you, what would that be?

HW: I can't exactly say, but one thing that has proven beneficial to me is that when you have a mind to do a thing, and you feel it in yourself that it's the right thing to do, stick with it, regardless of the circumstances around you. When your mind is made up to do a thing, you let nothing deter you from that goal.

DR: How has that attitude helped you?

HW: I can't put it in so many words, but down through the ages, if I had not had that attitude, I wouldn't have made it I don't believe.

DR: I'm through with my questions. Is there anything else you want to tell me about yourself or you think is important to say?

HW: No, I think we've just about covered everything that's happened to me in Michigan.

DR: Well, then, thank you very much for taking the time to do this.