

6-29-1999

Boeve, Clarence Oral History Interview: Business and Industry in Holland

Anna Holt

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_business



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Holt, Anna, "Boeve, Clarence Oral History Interview: Business and Industry in Holland" (1999). *Business and Industry in Holland*. Paper 2.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_business/2

Published in: 1999 - *Business and Industry in Holland (H88-0234)* - *Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project*, June 29, 1999. Copyright © 1999 Hope College, Holland, MI.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Business and Industry in Holland by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.

Interview with Clarence Boeve

Interviewed by Anna Holt

1999

AH: This is Tuesday, June 29, an interview between Anna Holt and Clarence Boeve.

Let's just start with your personal history, where you were born, etc.

CB: I was born in Holland, north of Holland about four miles. I grew up on a farm there.

I was born on [date removed], 1929, which makes me just a flash from seventy. I went to grade school out in the country in an area called Pine Creek, which is still there, the school is Pine Creek, it's in the West Ottawa school district obviously. That was through grade eight and then I went to Holland Christian High School and graduated from there. Then I attended Hope College. I was there in 1947 fall, I graduated from high school in '47 and then I did Hope and graduated in 1951 with a business/econ major. I then did a little time in military activity and got into some various jobs in Holland and ended up at Herman Miller in 1955.

AH: What did you start as?

CB: I started at Herman Miller in the customer service area. Within customer service came quite a bit of the international activity, so I ended up getting into the international business and as that whole thing grew, I ended up responsible for a lot of that area. That was between '55 and '61 I believe, about 1961 I went full-time international. We could talk quite a bit about why a little furniture company in western Michigan could have any appeal throughout the world, that's a whole story in

itself, which I guess I would be expected to speak to, right? The way Herman Miller got into international, I would submit was probably more by default than design, as often things are, fortuitous things happen. If you go back into the history of Herman Miller you find that Mr. D.J. DePree was essentially the founder of Herman Miller. The name Herman Miller was put on the company because his father-in-law (Herman Miller) was one of the original owners of that little business in Zeeland. Herman Miller himself had a quality name in the furniture business in Grand Rapids before that. There was always this problem in those days of furniture companies just making the same old, same old. They just copied everything that was done historically in various design periods. Those periods were probably original at that time, but from then on, Chippendale, all those names that come up with furniture was just a matter of reproducing these things. If you made good quality stuff you could do some business, but there were just tons of little companies in that business. D.J. was a very, very conscientious, ethical fellow. He even started having problems with the honesty of that kind of business. During that period, which would have been in the late '30's, a fellow named Gilbert Rohde, a New York designer, walked into the little furniture showroom that Herman Miller then had in Grand Rapids. Rohde walks in there one day with his roll of furniture designs and it was all very clean, simple, un-ornate, unembellished kind of plain designs. He came to D.J. in Grand Rapids at that time and said, "I got these designs, I want to try to get them manufactured." For all those years before that D.J. was making furniture that if you did this a little, that a little, you'd come up with this stuff that was not at all different than everybody else's.

Rohde came in there with this kind of a cubic look, stuff that was clean, simple, no enrichment of it in terms of carvings and all that stuff. D.J. took a look at these drawings and he said, "If you change this a little, and you change that a little." [laughter] Rohde says, "That's what you've been doing all these years." He just rolled up his roll of drawings and said, "Either you make it the way I design it," because I'm the designer, you aren't sort of thing. "Either you make it that way or you don't make it at all." D.J. got thinking about this and he started realizing that there was a tremendous honesty to this product that Rohde was proposing. He ended up starting to make some of this stuff as it was drawn. He didn't have any money, Herman Miller's company was not all that far, maybe a year, from folding up the tent [laughter] because they weren't making enough to keep things going. He thought he couldn't lose. He said, "I don't have any money to pay you for this." Rohde said, "Let's do a royalty thing." I think the number might have been around three percent. Some figure, anyway, was arrived at which would allow D.J. to go ahead without fronting up a lot of money and buying the designs. He paid him as he sold it. That was the beginning of that modern design that Herman Miller got into. D.J. started seeing that this kind of furniture was a lot more honest than the other stuff he was making. He still kept on with that because he wasn't going to shoot the whole wad on one hand. He went on making this stuff and it got to be far better value, he felt than the reproductions. He ends up turning the company really into the first manufacturer of modern designs. I don't recall all of the exact dates, but I would say around 1940, Gilbert Rohde suddenly died and D.J. was without a designer. He, through a search

at that time for a designer, came on this fellow, a guy named George Nelson, who was an architect in New York. He wasn't a furniture designer at all. The stuff he did was the kind of thing that D.J. really saw as an extension of what he was doing. The thing that I should point out, D.J. was a very ethical and devout man, he was a very intense practicing Christian with a Baptist persuasion. He had never, ever thought that he did anything to create what was happening at Herman Miller. He would, to his last day, absolutely stated the fact that it was just absolutely providential that Rohde walked into that showroom that day. He was in dire straits financially and he ends up getting this thing going through what he always felt as no fault of his own. Nelson came on the scene, this was in 1945, '44. He got a whole new line of furniture going in 1946 for D.J. and Herman Miller. D.J.'s sons, Hugh DePree and Max DePree, were both in the company at the time that I started with them in 1955. I didn't know anything about furniture. I don't pretend to be an expert on it today, but the quality of things that were being made was very, very good. As this George Nelson product came on the market, and then Nelson knew of a fellow named Charles Eames out on the west coast. Charles Eames was also a designer and an architect and he was doing some very interesting stuff in molded plywood and so forth. Nelson, even before his designs got onto the market, said to D.J., "You've got to look at this guy Eames. He's the future in this whole modern furniture design." Anyway, I don't know all the details of it, they're all printed somewhere. [laughter] He then got into Herman Miller's design camp, Eames did. Then Herman Miller started getting some international recognition. When I said earlier that it wasn't by design that Herman

Miller - it was through design, but not by design - that Herman Miller got into this international field. It was the people who in Europe especially, saw the merits of this. It was product that was totally scaled to the human being. It wasn't some huge over-stuffed stuff that this country was peddling otherwise. He ended up with a natural production for international architectural situations. I'm thinking of, as the years went on, into airports, etc. It doesn't make any difference where you are in the world, there are certain things that don't have a national accent. Airports are functional, they aren't something that may just be appealing to an eye or where an American would like early American, a European would like something else. It's just that people who travel through these places, obviously all have the same taste. It's applicable to the function. Which is the old story that the form follows the function, which is more true in airplanes than it is in lots of things. We're finally getting that way with automobiles, after they knocked off the twenty-four inch fins in 1959. [laughter] Finally getting it. But that didn't come from this country either. That came from probably originally from Europe and then copied by the Japanese. The point is, you get a draw from overseas from people who need this kind of furniture because in Europe they're apartment dwellers. They don't have huge homes where they stuff a lot of furniture in. It's got to be scaled to the person's application, the requirement of the housing. That's why the marvelous stuff still out of Europe is the Danish, to me is still the Scandinavian furniture. That stuff comes off as very appealing, but it's also, because it's Scandinavian, it's also kind of woodsy, which you kind of like too, as warmth. The application of that kind of thing is what made Herman Miller

international. That was about 1960 when it seemed like someone should work at this a little more that part-time. I was rather fortunate to be in Herman Miller at that time and at a position to where they could use me to do that. The way it all happened internationally was that Herman Miller would give a license. If you're a person or a company in Venezuela, or any country, who would like to make, import our product, it gets very, very difficult to import into other countries product that is made there in their own way. In hard currency, you just couldn't get permission to import, for us to export product into those countries because they had a furniture industry. We'd end up trying to allow it to happen by issuing a license then, where I would say to you if you're the manufacturer, "I will give you the drawings, I will give you graphic help, I will give you all the specs, give you what you need to manufacture that product. Then you will pay me a percentage of your sales, " which is back to the old royalty thing. We would also then have a separate agreement for the trademarks and our graphic stuff. This is how we kind of got into that. In Europe, where it started. We started in Switzerland, in England, with people who would manufacture our products under a license initially and then we subsequently joined with some of these people and actually had joint companies with them. That went on, we ultimately did this in Japan and Australia. I spent a fair amount of time on airplanes. It was very interesting, very tiring and I'm not so sure that it was the way to go, but it was the only way to go at that time and point in history. We didn't have an attitude particularly at Herman Miller at that time that said, this has to make tons of money. D.J. never saw, I shouldn't say this certainly later, but at that time, the main reason

to make some money was to keep the payroll going. It wasn't for the sake of making money. He never saw that as a very noble or moral thing anyway, I don't think. As it developed obviously it had to become that or you couldn't survive. He saw that more clear later, I'm sure. I think of his attitude when he was president of the company, he had a simpatico heart for people. I remember his attitude towards Brazil. He took a trip to Brazil and he looked the situation over there and he saw that country needed what we may have had to offer at that time. I remember him saying something to the effect that if one thousand small U.S. companies would go to Brazil and have their products made there, that would be a good thing for Brazil. And if the other nine hundred and ninety-nine don't go [laughter], that doesn't give us an excuse. It was a marvelous kind of thing to be involved in a company where you had that kind of simpatico, sense of caring and so forth. To work at a company like that, at a company where you could experience a kindred spirit, that was providential as far as I'm concerned. Before that already, we got into this whole Scanlon plan idea, you're probably acquainted with that, participative management plan. That came through Dr. Carl Frost at Michigan State University. It's been put in writing quite often by various people, who have written books on Herman Miller's history about D.J. - and I always come back to him, he certainly wasn't the sole force, but he was the original direction. Hugh DePree and Max, his sons went on with it because they were in the business at that time. There's this story which you would read in these books called the "millwright story". There was a fellow who was the millwright at Herman Miller at that time, I guess it would have been not too late in D.J.'s tenure there, but early

on. He was a pretty tough guy. This fellow who was the millwright was just one of those "guys in the factory" to D.J. at that earlier stage. The millwright died. D.J. went to the widow's house to call on her and she produced some books of poetry, they were written by him. It's just so unusual. I was always very touched by this because he walked home afterward and he read these things and he got very introspective. He went home and he just couldn't get past the ideas of this fellow. He was a guy, who he always thought of as just this bloke and he turns out writing this very, very nice poetry. He was very moved by that. He had to ask the question, are all people ordinary or are they all extraordinary? He concluded that they were extraordinary, that man was something different than what he was kind of seeing them as. That was a turning point in his attitude toward the factory and factory workers. That's where you get into this whole Scanlon plan and all that. That was a flash back, but some how that was part of how this company ended up in the direction it went. About early '60's, he saw some stuff - well, Hugh DePree, the management then got in touch with a fellow who was an inventor, a guy by the name of Robert Probst. He was a brilliant, brilliant guy. He invented all kinds of things. He's from Colorado and his family had a ranch. He always just was thinking about how can something improve and how can you simplify things. He had things where you'd know what cows to cut out of the herd for reproduction. He had numbers in there, in their hides where you could hit them with a scope and say, "That's the one!" instead of hog-tying them and checking them over. He related to the simplicity of a cowboy's gear, a saddle. You only had what you had to have. That's how he approached

design. He was an inventor but a designer. Anyway, this Bob Probst and D.J. and Hugh and Max, got together and formed what was called Herman Miller Research Company in Ann Arbor, Michigan, near the University. They took one of our guys from Zeeland, a fellow named Glenn Walters who's a very dynamic, hard-working, hard-driving bloke and they sent him there to run this research center and to work with Bob Propst as the researcher. They started developing desks which would have multi-station applications. This is not particularly new, a roll-top desk, but to have it in an office at a stand-up level was. He would look at a guy like Churchill who did all his work standing up at a desk and other great people as well. So Probst designed this little work arena, where you could have everything available. It's like you're shelving unit's here, you could put your projects up there, you didn't have to hide them somewhere in a file. You had a project going on the roll-top desk top and instead of destroying your whole work progress at night by collapsing it all and putting it away, you pulled the top down over it, turned the key. In the morning it was there, you knew where you had to start. That kind of thing. He developed what was called at that time Action Office. That was Action Office 1. Then Action Office 2 became all of these wall units with hang-on desks and things. Everybody in the industry just took off on it, including one of the local companies - local here as opposed to local Zeeland. That got to be a huge business, huge. It was at that time, in 1968 that product finally came to fruition in this Action Office open plan system, where you had these ubiquitous panels. I mean, today they've enhanced and done these things so much nicer and so much more eye appeal than they had at that time.

It was more or less kind of neutral color. Then you'd put some bold fabric on the flipper doors and things. The point is that suddenly Herman Miller went from a small business, which when I started at Herman Miller in '55 was doing like four million dollars a year in volume. In 1968, there was perhaps only seventeen million. It just went up, exponential growth after that. That was about the time that we decided to start a factory in England. I was the resident Yank over there for a year and a half or so, just to get some things started and help set the tone for whatever was going to happen. The growth after that just went up. In 1968 or 69 the company went public. It obviously had grown significantly by then. When I retired in 1990, I was sixty, it was like eight hundred and fifty million dollars in sales. This past year, I guess it was a billion seven or eight. I think without Probst inventions and his designs that company would have grown on a nice extrapolated curve, but he put stuff into there that just boomed it into the stratosphere.

AH: So how much was still furniture and how much became office furniture?

CB: We were actually in office furniture, in desking and so forth much before that Action Office stuff. It was L-shaped desks, high quality, but all very cubic, clean, no embellishments or phoney enrichments. In my tenure there, we didn't antique stuff with chains. [laughter] I don't know how you feel when you come home at night, tell you're wife, "Hey, I banged up ten desks today." [laughter] It must really be something. Percentage wise, by that time we were almost going out of the residential business. Recently, a few years ago, they did start making a few little things. Again, reproductions of the original stuff. You can't believe the collectors value of those

products that were made in 1940-1960. The fifties is back in furniture today. Chairs, they go for hundreds of dollars, little simple things. They're modern antiques. I wonder if, when I say we were maybe about seventeen to twenty million dollars when we started really going into the open plan office furniture, I wouldn't think that we would have grown so dramatically. We would have grown, like I say in some kind of straight line, going up a little. That kind of covers the actual progress of that. For the most part, those design people were pretty sacred. D.J. and Hugh and Max, everybody that was involved at that time, did what the designers said. They didn't have all winners either, but boy if we'd kept all their losers, you could make a ton today on antiques. [laughter]

AH: How many countries did you end up being in?

CB: I'd have to kind of do them on my fingers. If you start Latin America, we were being manufactured in one form or another there in Venezuela, Columbia, Argentina, Brazil and other smaller functions in Uruguay, which is a pretty small country. Then in Europe we initially were in Italy and France, Germany, Switzerland and England, sales outlets in Scandinavian countries. So you add another five or so there, but that got reduced down to the only manufacturing operation is in England. Then Japan, Australia, so maybe fourteen. It was a natural kind of extension. The Action Office system as such, which was the big boomer, had a strong American accent. It saves space over here, but you go over to Japan and they're already working on a three foot desk. [laughter] It's pretty hard to reduce that a whole lot. It did have that kind of open plan, the way that the States is. Everything is kind of an easy come, easy go

sort of society over here. In other countries there's more permanence to things. You don't kind of use it a year and throw it away, like we tend to do with our fast food chains and this whole kind of "pitch it" society, which of course feeds on itself. You got to produce everything that's thrown away again. I can't speak very intelligently to the situation today because I've been out of it for quite some time. I was in international perhaps twenty-five years. The next eight I was at Herman Miller's subsidiary in Spring Lake in an office metal furniture company that Herman Miller bought.

AH: Let's talk a little bit about the local competition.

CB: You've got Steelcase, Haworth and Herman Miller and Trendway now. Trendway started from a panel, Haworth I think got out of that particular business and sold it to a guy named George Herringa, whose family now run this company north of town and it's big. They make much of the same kind of systems furniture essentially as Herman Miller and the other western Michigan furniture companies do.

[end of side A]

[beginning of side B]

CB: I know that because I was there. I know when Haworth started there product line, they went on and ended up with their own extension of these designs. I'm not faulting all the stuff they've done since.

AH: There was a problem with a patent infringement, wasn't there?

CB: You bet. I've never felt very comfortable about Herman Miller having to pay for essentially one patent that they never would have had if they (other furniture

companies) hadn't manufactured all the other designs ahead of that.

AH: That was a large chunk of money too.

CB: Yes. I just thought it was absolutely, really wrong. I saw enough of the early stages, because I did a fair amount of patent work at the time with those initial...you couldn't, most of the stuff wasn't patentable either. We would have a hanging strip that had notches in it, you'd hang things on. We would have a hinge that was patented, so they would drive a plastic strip down and that became the hinge. That's perfectly legitimate, it just seemed to me, to take a reasonable amount of gall to do what happened.

AH: How would you describe the relationship between management and employees at Herman Miller?

CB: At the time that I was there it was absolutely marvelous. As I mentioned earlier, there is this kind of kindred spirit. That whole DePree family were gentlemen. I had the unbelievable good fortune of spending practically my working life, thirty-five years I spent there with people that you wanted to go to work with. Those earlier days was just unbelievable the way there was never any turf that needed to be defended, for years. It subsequently got to be that way, everybody would get their hunk out of somebody else. There was a tremendous bond of, Kipling says the bond of common funk. You had to get together to do the job. You never had any problems with who's going to usurp my territory and my rights. There's always a very good attitude. Between the management - you can't say management and the workers, that's degrading. It was just, everybody had their own job. Somebody got

paid more than someone else because they had more responsibility to make the right decisions. The skill level of the people, to me, generally I saw it as equal. I'm not trying to edify myself or attitudes, but I know that being a fairly left-handed bloke if I hang a curtain rod, I have three holes and I really only needed one. [laughter] I'm strictly a measure once, cut twice kind of guy. I'd get in with these people who could use their hands in ways I just couldn't comprehend. I know when I was up in the metal company, lots of mornings when I wanted to get my head cleared I'd go down into the model shop, where these guys could do anything with steel. You could not deny that these people had tremendous contribution to make. If that is an attitude throughout a company, that doesn't mean everybody has to be paid the same. I think I should be paid a little more for having to be gone three or four weeks on a airplane, then perhaps someone who, even though he is very skilled, but still can live the normal family life. That seemed clear to D.J. DePree, Max DePree, Hugh DePree and the rest of the management in general. You'd see them out on the shop floor all the time, they'd always be out getting insights from people who were....in fact, those earlier days when I was at Herman Miller, nothing got shipped off that shipping dock, and I'm talking about home furniture and office furniture until D.J. or Hugh said, "Ok, that one's fit to go." And if it wasn't it got redone. All in all, the interaction of the people - management and the owners and all - was very, very, good. A case study if you ever saw one.

AH: What kind of changes did you see when the company went public?

CB: In those early years, I can't say that I noticed a whole lot of change. There was more

accountability financially. You had to produce the numbers if someone else owned the company. Even then the line would be held, you wouldn't just lay off a whole bunch of folks in order to preserve the bottom line. If the business was going a little tough, we all ate it, so did the share-holders.

AH: What's your opinion of the business climate in this area? Do you think that's had an affect on why Herman Miller was so successful?

CB: I would say certainly to the extent that there's a work ethic here that is unmistakable. I think that has contributed significantly to the success of the local companies. I think all that is changing too, in terms of the scarcity of help, it's tough, I'm sure. I might have to go back to work. [laughter]

AH: What do you see for the future for Herman Miller?

CB: I think they'll continue to do well because they have a long history of designing product that has significant application. They aren't just designing product for the sake of something new. I think most of the stuff they do is very, very, well thought out. I think the future is good as long as they keep the important things in mind, obviously. One is that you got to have product that is functionally beyond the fashion route. To me that fashion is very short-lived. You have to have an attitude that still involves people. To the extent that they have that today, I can't really speak to. There's some signs for awhile, it wasn't that clear to me. I don't know.

AH: Do you think they'll continue to expand internationally?

CB: Yes. I think they will. I think they have to because it's no longer - we have to I suppose, say globally instead of internationally. The market is that, it's a global

market. People are more alike than they are different in the terms of their needs. When you get into the business support product, I think it's getting more and more. I may be dead wrong on that, but I think it's getting more and more with a common denominator with the information explosion that just keeps going on all the time. There's nothing really that has the same, like I said earlier, something might have an American accent. I don't if something has a German accent anymore or not, or Japanese. Less of it certainly than there once was, in my working days.

AH: Thanks so much for your time.