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Keppel, Ruth Oral History Interview: Local Women

Carol Bechtel

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INTRODUCTION

The Hope College Oral History Project was designed to record and transcribe for permanent collection the "living heritage" of Holland, Michigan. Since the project's birth in 1977, Hope student researchers have interviewed people with various perspectives on Holland's history. Past projects have included:

- **Former Hope Faculty Members & Personnel** - 1977 - by Nancy Swinyard
- **Past Executives of the Reformed Church** - 1978 - by Conrad Strauch & 1979 by Derk M. Strauch
- **Important Women of Holland, Michigan** - 1980 - by Carol Bechtel

The persons interviewed represent a vital, but non-renewable resource, whose reflections will provide primary material for future historical research.

Upon the completion of each interview session, the taped conversation was transcribed and edited by both the interviewer and the interviewee. Some alterations concerning accuracy of detail may have been suggested by the interviewer during the editing process, but at all times the viewpoint of the interviewee has been maintained. If the researcher should discover discrepancies between the interviews and published materials, it must be remembered that some divergence may be expected due to the highly personalized perspective of the interview. No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. No two people share identical viewpoints, and the interval of time between the interviewee's experiences and the events mentioned can sometimes intensify this divergence. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives in Van Zoeren Library.

Without the support of Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Dean of the Humanities and the Fine Arts, and Mr. William K. Anderson, Vice President of Business and Finance, this project would not have become a reality. Dr. Elton Bruins has given generously of his time and expertise as the advisor to the student interviewers. Finally, the success of this project must be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees - each gracious, receptive, and cooperative.
Interview with
Miss Ruth Keppel
in her home
in Holland, Michigan
on
August 6, 1981
with
Carol Bechtel
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   (Original Copy Only - Hope College Archives)
Ruth Keppel was born March 22, 1896 in Holland, Michigan. Today, one of her chief delights is to tell the stories about the early days of Holland, as related to her by her father, Albert Keppel. Before the start of her personal interview, Miss Keppel was kind enough to read some of these stories to me, which she has carefully written down. Some of the stories found in Part I have already been published in the little book she had published for Holland's Centennial Celebration in 1947 – Trees to Tulips. Others are stories she is saving for future collection, especially ones with "Women of Holland, Michigan" as a theme.

It seems rather providential that Holland has been blessed by Miss Keppel's knack for both writing and remembering. Already an accomplished violinist in junior high, Miss Keppel originally embarked on a musical career. She attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and graduated from Chicago Musical College after studying with the great Dutch artist, Leon Samitini. She then returned to Holland to teach violin and to direct the Holland Junior and Senior High orchestras. After many years of service in these capacities, however, Miss Keppel became afflicted with a bone disease which forced her to give up violin. Since then, she has devoted herself to needlework and to her writing. Although Holland was grieved at the loss of such a fine violinist and teacher, Miss Keppel's contributions toward preserving Holland's heritage have certainly proven invaluable.

In a lovingly polished frame beside Miss Keppel's staircase hangs a poem carefully crafted in needlepoint. I believe it characterizes Miss Keppel's devotion to her father, her city, and her memories of both:

All to myself I think of you -
Think of the things we used to do,
Think of the things we used to say,
Think of each happy yesterday;
Sometimes I sigh and sometimes I smile,
But I keep each olden, golden while
All to myself.

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On the wall of her sitting room hangs still another frame which Miss Keppel exhibits with pride. It contains a certificate given to her by the American Association of University Women for her outstanding citizenship. It quotes Miss Keppel as saying:

When I think what our forefathers did to build a city that would be a worthy place for their children's children to live, I am very humble. I hope I have done some good for our beloved city - Holland, Michigan.

After my contact with Miss Keppel, I was left with little room to doubt Miss Keppel's succeeding many times over at this humble goal. I felt that I had been highly privileged to meet one of the truly great women of Holland, Michigan.
A. The Arrival

"The history of Holland, Michigan is one of the most fascinating tales of any city in Michigan. It is a story of how within one year seventeen hundred emigrants from the Netherlands braved the dangers of an unknown future to settle in a dense forest and by sheer will power to develop that locality so that it has eventually become one of the beauty spots of our country. The emigrants came in separate groups, ranging in number from three persons to several hundred. We are apt to forget the sufferings that were endured those first few years of the colony. The colonists were molested by the Indians, they were cheated by Americans who took advantage of the fact that the Dutch did not understand the Americans' laws, they suffered disease caused by undrained swamps and poor food. It was only their faith in God that caused the Dutch to endure to the end the hardships that came their way."

B. Pioneer Women

"We are apt to forget the part played by the pioneer women of Holland, Michigan, who without recognition formed the foundation of a fine city. To them I should like to pay tribute. The lot of the pioneer women was not an easy one. Even after the first few years of privations they had a life filled with hardships. Modern so-called necessities, such as wash machines, electric irons, vacuum cleaners and ready-made clothes, were unknown in the early days. Each Monday morning one could see the mothers bending over a washtub, scrubbing the clothes with soap they had prepared. And then the heavy flatiron which had been heated over the fireplace or cook stove. On baking day the kitchen table would be filled with freshly baked loaves of homemade bread, pies and cakes, to say nothing of the balkanbrij, saucijenbroodjes and countless other goodies made from recipes that have been handed down to us by our grandmothers. On cleaning day everything must
be made spotless. Twice each year the women had to refill every mattress with new straw and before this operation was completed their arms would be scratched and bleeding. And then all the clothes for the family must be made by hand and a record of the beautiful stitches can be seen on the articles our grandmothers made which are preserved for us in the Holland Museum.

Recreation was an unknown thing for adult or child. The Ladies Aid Society and the Missionary Society were the women's only diversion. Frouw Arens, who lived in Graafschap, walked three miles to Holland every day with two pails of milk which she carried on a yoke, delivering the milk to her customers. Later Mrs. Arens used a horse and buggy. After the men of the family had left for work in the fields, to chop down the trees, or to help with the building of roads, the Indians would come to beg for food. My Grandmother DeVries was so afraid of them that she would give them whatever they asked for.

The pioneer women were always fearful for the health of their families. Poor shelters and undrained swamps caused an alarming amount of sickness. The only doctor in the community was a Dr. Van Nus and medicine was scarce. Dr. Van Raalte distributed the medicine which consisted mostly of calomel and quinine. In the year 1847 sickness and death entered every home and there were not enough well to care for the sick. The oldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. T. Keppel was born in 1849. That year twenty-two children were born in the colony and only two survived – Jane Keppel and Pietje Ter Beek.

Mice were very numerous in the early days of Holland, so Grandfather DeVries, then a lad of fourteen, was sent to Allegan by his parents, with money to buy a cat and a pig. He made the required purchases, putting the cat in a bag and tying the bag around his neck. He put a rope around the pig's leg, in order to lead him. Everything went well for the first mile or two, but soon the pig resented the imposed walk and staged a sit-down strike. John did not know what to do, so he
sat down on a log to cry. He ended by carrying both the cat and pig home. The return trip took two days.

Of course the early settlers had only the crudest of furniture. Many couples started housekeeping with a stump of a tree for a table and a packing box for chairs. When my grandparents were first married, they had only two chairs. When company came, they placed a board across the chairs and all sat in a row. Although they often thought of the pretty homes they had left in the Netherlands, they never complained.

So many people died in 1847 that it was thought advisable to build an orphanage to care for the orphans. The building was erected but was never used, as the kindhearted neighbors and friends took care of these children. The orphanage was later used as a school and finally a printing house. It was located where the Western Theological Seminary now stands.

The pioneer women were not unmindful of the education of their children. Records show that the first school was begun in September, 1847 and Ira Hoyt was the first school teacher. Mr. Hoyt was an American who came from Kalamazoo, Michigan to direct the children in educational matters. He received a salary of thirty dollars a month. School was held in the first log church. These Dutch boys and girls were not behind in knowledge, for that they did not learn in school they acquired the hard way by practical experience. In 1848 a school for adult education was held at the home of Mr. Houtkamp. The textbook used was a Dutch and English Bible.

During the spring and summer of 1847 Sunday worship was held out-of-doors in front of Dr. Van Raalte's home on Fairbanks Avenue. Sitting on logs the people would listen to their leader advise, admonish and encourage them. These were not simple messages as one might expect from a man who had such mountainous duties to perform, but they were scholarly, dramatic addresses, as shown by the sermons handed down to us.
In the later part of the summer of 1847, the first log church was constructed. It was located on the present site of the Pilgrim Home Cemetery. The burying ground adjoined the church, a custom brought from the Netherlands. The building was thirty-five feet by sixty feet. The log church was used until 1856 when the Pillar Church on Ninth Street was built.

The church consistory were the administrators of justice in the early pioneer days. Some of the older people of Holland still remember punishments they received from the hand of some staid churchmen. One time my grandfather received a report that his son was seen fighting with another boy. After hearing both sides of the case, he said, "My son, remember that you must never start a fight, but if the other fellow steps on your toes, fight back."

In the first log church in Holland the people did not own a musical instrument and so they started the custom of having the best singer start the psalms and lead the singing. The leader was called the "voorzinger." Dr. Van Raalte often asked Grandmother DeVries to take the part of the "voorzinger," for she had a beautiful soprano voice. In the Pillar Church there were two men with fine voices. They were a horse jockey by the name of Mr. Haverkate who sat in the southeast corner of the church and Mr. Rooseboom who always sat in the northwest part of the church. Each would try to outdo the other. But they did have fine voices. The first hand organ was used until 1880. Albert Keppel, my father, pumped the first organ and when he got tired of the job George Steketee took his place."

C. **Transportation in the Early Days**

"The contrast in traveling today and yesterday has been recorded: 'Today we travel to Grand Rapids in our beautiful, comfortable cars in less than an hour. In August, 1847 representatives were sent from the Zeeland colony to go to Grand Rapids to buy the needed supply of food. The trip down was made on foot and trying to find their way through the unfamiliar Indian trails they were lost many a
time. Reaching Grand Rapids the desired articles were purchased, such as flour, coffee and potatoes. They paid for this in gold. Then the produce was loaded on a flat boat and poled to Grand Haven. On account of bad weather they found it necessary to remain in Grand Haven eight days before they dared to venture on Lake Michigan. Then they proceeded to Black Lake. Thus, yesterday's trip to Grand Rapids took three weeks."

D. Christine Van Raalte Gilmore

"When Dr. A. C. Van Raalte and his party left the Netherlands in 1846 for their new home in America, little Christine was a baby. On the passage over she slept in the cradle that is now a cherished relic of the Netherlands Museum. Christine Van Raalte married Reverend Gilmore. From 1888 to 1909 she was the "lady principal" in charge of women at Hope College - the college founded by her father. In 1907 she was appointed Dean of Women of Hope College. She died April 12, 1933.

Christine Van Raalte was a devout Christian. She was the founder of the Board of Missions in the West. She also founded the Federation of Women's Societies in Holland in 1919. She was the founder of the Christine Van Raalte Hospital for Leprosy in Portuguese East Africa. I remember her as a great woman, and a worthy daughter of Dr. A. C. Van Raalte."

E. Anna Sims Perkins

And then this is what I wrote about Mrs. Perkins - one of the finest women I've ever known:

"Anna Sims Perkins was one of the most remarkable women I have ever known. Against tremendous odds she became an outstanding success in business at a time when women's place was supposed to be in the home. When she moved to Holland in 1930 and purchased a home on Lakeshore Drive, she was over seventy, and had retired
from an active business career in the hardware business in Delphos, Ohio. In 1904 the Delphos Manufacturing Company, a ten thousand dollar corporation was producing a non-overflow pump can. Forty years later, its assets were over a million dollars. Annie had served as sales manager, secretary, and treasurer, and after retirement remained a valued member of the board of directors.

In retirement Ann Perkins was as energetic as ever. She was a charter member of the Holland Garden Club, and her garden was the envy of residents on the Southshore Drive. She had brought shrubs and plants from Ohio.

She is perhaps best remembered as the "Apron Lady." From colorful feed sacks she made over 1000 aprons, which she presented to the Hope Church Aid Society to sell for two dollars each. She was never idle. Some Holland women still treasure an Annie Perkins Apron.

Her benevolences were many - helping young people through college and others in need. Her garden was her great pride, and she always shared her flowers and vegetables with her friends.

In many ways, Mrs. Perkins was a fore-runner of the women's lib. movement. Years ago women did not have the opportunity open to them today. 'I ate, slept, and drank hardware,' she said. 'Hard work and sensible eating are necessary to a long life; it's the mind that controls the health.' At the age of 85 she broke her wrist, and with her arm in a cast she drove five miles from the doctor's office to her home. This 'slight accident,' as she called it, did not hamper her in her daily routine. She continued her fine needlework, and kept her fingers limber."

BECHTEL: She sounds like quite a lady!
KEPPEL: Oh, she was a wonderful person. Shall I say what I wrote about my father?
BECHTEL: Yes, please do.
F. Albert C. Keppel

"If I have known a great man, it was my father. He was gentle, kind, humble, and forgiving. He would never gossip about anyone, and would always forgive other men's faults. He had great courage in times of storm. He had a keen business mind, but was always generous and gave to others beyond his means. He believed that he was bound to protect his widow and children financially after his death. He always said he wanted to do something for his city - to leave it better than he found it. He would always be telling me historical facts about our community and saying, 'Ruth, someone must carry this on.' He was a great nature lover, especially trees. He would always say, 'When a man plants a tree, there is something living after him.' When he gave the school board of Holland, Michigan the Albert Keppel School Forest Preserve, he said, 'I am doing this because I want the boys of Holland to protect our country's greatest asset - its trees.' Blessed is one who had a father like I had."

E. Summary

"Whereas in 1847 Holland, Michigan was a land of trees, today it is the land of tulips. If the early pioneers of Holland, Michigan could only come back to our city for Tulip Time, how pleased they would be. It would mean that they had built a city that was a worthy place for their children's children to live."

II. INTERVIEW

BECHTEL: Thanks so much for reading those things. I think it's extra special to hear them coming from your own voice. They're exciting to read, but to hear you reading them is even more so, I think. You've just written so much it seems on the history of Holland, all the way back from your great grandfather to your grandfather and your father. But you've never really written anything specifically about you...
KEPPEL: No...

BECHTEL: And as I see it, you're a very important part of the history of Holland, Michigan.

KEPPEL: Yes, you know my father was always telling me these stories, and he was so afraid they'd be forgotten. And he'd always say, "Ruth, someone must carry this on." So when we had our 100th celebration of Holland in 1947 I wrote my little book, Trees to Tulips. And that was the first time these historical facts had been written. I was about the only one at that time who was interested in those things, but now everybody is getting interested. Many of these historical facts about Holland today originally came from my tongue. And not a week goes by but people ask me for historical information.

BECHTEL: I would believe that. What was behind your choosing the title, Trees to Tulips?

KEPPEL: Well, I thought...you see, when our forefathers came here, this was a land of trees. There was nothing here but trees and swamps. And now we have our Tulip Time, so I thought that would be an appropriate title.

BECHTEL: Where were you born and when?

KEPPEL: I was born March 22, 1896 in Holland, Michigan. My parents were born in Holland, Michigan. And all of my grandparents came to Holland, Michigan in 1847. My Grandfather Keppel came to America two years before Van Raalte. He came alone; and he was sent here by his father and Rev. Scholte (who later settled in Iowa) to inspect the United States. A young boy seventeen years old was sent here to inspect the United States! He wrote back for them to come on, and he was the one that advised Rev. Scholte to settle in Iowa. So, three months after Van Raalte settled in Holland, Rev. Scholte with 800 settlers settled in Pella, Iowa. And
amongst that group were all the Keppels except my grandfather - my grandfather came to Holland, Michigan. His youngest brother Jan was seven years old at that time, and he was one of the first to enlist in the Civil War from Pella, Iowa. He was killed in the Battle of Shiloh. And the month before he was killed he wrote a letter to his little niece in Holland, Michigan, which is Mrs. Marsilje, my father's oldest sister - who was the grandmother of Nelson Bosman, who was the mayor of Holland.

BECHTEL: That's an interesting little trek!

KEPPEL: And I might add, too, that Rev. Scholte was a great friend of Lincoln.

BECHTEL: Oh, really?

KEPPEL: And he was on the Republican Committee that nominated Lincoln for President of the United States. Later he was in the Legislature...Rev. Scholte.

BECHTEL: Wasn't your grandfather originally going to go settle with Rev. Scholte, then?

KEPPEL: No, he came here before Scholte.

BECHTEL: Oh, I see...

KEPPEL: He came here to inspect the United States before Scholte came here. He came in '45 and they came in '47. And he's the one that advised Scholte to settle in Iowa because he thought it was better land than it was here in Michigan - which it was.

BECHTEL: Yes, I could vouch for that!

KEPPEL: Yes. Because they had all the trees here to contend with. They had to chop down all the trees. And you must remember they had only one horse in the community - and it all had to be manual. And so many people died that first year because they couldn't stand...take it all.
BECHTEL: He had a pretty influential say, then, it sounds like.

KEPPEL: What was that?

BECHTEL: He had a very influential say in who came over and where they went.

KEPPEL: Oh, yes. In fact, he was the right hand man of Dr. Van Raalte. And when Dr. Van Raalte couldn't preach he preached in the old Dutch Church here on Ninth Street... I was born on 7th and College, and that was our first home.

BECHTEL: Is the house still standing now?

KEPPEL: No, they recently tore it down. My grandfather started Keppel's Store - he was one of the first merchants in Holland in the early days. I still have the desk... that first desk which was made for our store in Holland. I still own it; my father told me always to keep it. And it was made by a local carpenter. In those days they did everything by bartering. You see, the people were very poor. And the people from the farms would come to my grandfather to buy lime and cement and they couldn't pay for it. So he would accept wood in exchange. And finally he got so much wood he didn't know what to do with it. So he would take it to DeYoung and Van Putten - the grocers - and exchange it for groceries. That's the way they did business in those days.

In 1882 the first coal was brought to Holland, Michigan. And the "DeGronwet," which was the city newspaper, needed coal to start their engine. And before that there had never been any coal in Holland. So they ordered a load from my grandfather. And my father delivered that coal in a two wheel dump cart. And the whole business district came to see what the new fuel was like.

BECHTEL: I see. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

KEPPEL: I had four sisters; two of them are dead.

BECHTEL: Were they older or younger than you?
KEPPEL: I was the second. And my mother was a musician, and she started us in music. She say I was musical so she started me in piano. And then I wanted a violin, so when I was seven she gave me a violin. And that became my profession.

BECHTEL: Wasn't a violin hard to come by in those days?

KEPPEL: Well, not particularly. You could...

BECHTEL: You could get one if you really wanted one...

KEPPEL: There wasn't a week went by when I was a child that I played for something here.

BECHTEL: Who was your teacher then?

KEPPEL: Well, that's kind of a long story. My very first teacher was Bernard DeVries; he was a cousin of mine. His father built what is now the Alumni House at Hope College. And I just had a few lessons from him and then I took from professional teachers from Grand Rapids.

BECHTEL: I see.

KEPPEL: And when I graduated from High school of course I wanted to take up music, so I went to Oberlin - Oberlin Conservatory of Music. And I finished my degrees with Dr. Leon Samitini, the great Dutch artist... at Chicago Music College - I graduated there.

BECHTEL: So, then did you come back to Holland after graduating from there?

KEPPEL: Oh, yes. And I started teaching in Holland. I had a large class in Holland. And I directed the school orchestras.

BECHTEL: So then your career goal was always music?

KEPPEL: Yes, until I got a bone disease and I had to give that up. And then after I had to give that up then I turned to writing and sewing.
BECHTEL: How old were you when you found that you had this bone disease?

KEPPEL: Oh, I don't remember just...a lot of years. But all my life before that had been music. I played for fifteen high school commencements.

BECHTEL: My goodness. That's quite a record.

KEPPEL: When I was a little girl I used to play for Hope College commencements and the Literary Club, as well as other local events.

BECHTEL: I'm just curious - what church did your family attend when you were growing up?

KEPPEL: We always attended Hope Church.

BECHTEL: Hope Church, I see.

KEPPEL: My grandfather was one of the originators of the Ninth Street Christian Reformed Church, and my father began there. When he married my mother he right away joined Hope Church and we've always been members there. My mother gave the wood carving there in memory of my father...

BECHTEL: Oh, really?

KEPPEL: ...the Lord's Supper. One time my mother and father and I went to California, and we way this wood carving by Lange - this great sculptor. And my father was so impressed because he loved wood so much. And so when he died my mother gave this to Hope Church in memory of him.

BECHTEL: What a very appropriate gift.

KEPPEL: This Lange - the sculptor of this wood carving - only made three of these...the one in California and ours and one other. He was a member of the Lange family - this Lange who carved it.

BECHTEL: How old were you when your father died, then? Do you remember?
KEPPEL: Well, my father died in 1939. He died in People's Bank of a heart attack. I was alone with him in one of those booths when he died. It was a terrible shock to me...

BECHTEL: I can imagine it was.

KEPPEL: ...because I idolized my father. You see, my mother the last years of her life was an invalid, and he and I took care of her. That's how he told me all of these stories. In fact, I was the only one in the family that was interested. My mother would get so sick of hearing us talk about it she'd say, "For mercy's sake, change the subject!" (laughter) But I'm glad now he told me.

BECHTEL: Yes, me too. It was worthwhile I think, all the time you spent listening...

KEPPEL: That's just it. All these stories, and every time I think of them I write them down. And most of them come to me in the middle of the night when I wake up. And I right away write them down, because if I don't I forget them again.

BECHTEL: That's a good idea. When you went to, say, grade school as a little girl, where was the grade school and what was a day in grade school like?

KEPPEL: Froebel School - that was on Tenth Street here. And in 1875 then the first public school came in. From the very beginning Van Raalte picked all the people that were on the consistory, and these same men were on the consistory and on every organization in Holland. These same men - for all these years - 20 years - these same men. Well, when the first public school started, the young people didn't like it that all these old people were on the school board, so they voted them out. And that provoked Van Raalte so much so that he took his relatives out of the schools. And he got my grandfather to take my father out too. And he put them in a little school on the campus - the Oggle House. My father first started school in the Oggle House, and his first teacher was a Mrs. Haigens. And to show what the education in those days was - the first day this little boy - five years old -
went to school the first question the teacher asked him: "Spell zebra." He didn't even know what a zebra was! (laughter) And he just sat there and repeated, "Spell zebra?"

BECHTEL: Was this a one room school house that you attended?

KEPPLE: Oh, no. It was a public school by that time, you know.

BECHTEL: I see.

KEPPLE: Oh, that was a modern school, you know, I graduated from Holland High School. And then I went to Oberlin.

BECHTEL: Set me see... Oh, I know what I wanted to ask you. What would you say some of the most crucial, personality-developing events were in your life? The watermarks...

KEPPLE: One of the most...things that I enjoyed the most was playing for Queen Juliana when she came to Holland in 1942. I was asked to play at the banquet given for her. I can remember that distinctly.

BECHTEL: Tell me something about that, like you did this morning.

KEPPLE: Well, this banquet was held in the Warm Friend Tavern, and the notables from Holland were invited there. And she was a very charming woman. I could tell that she and her husband loved each other - you could tell by the way they acted. And she was a fine person, too. After I got through playing then she sent her lady in waiting to tell me that she had enjoyed my music.

BECHTEL: Well, that was very nice. I'm sure that's a compliment you treasure.

KEPPLE: Yes.

BECHTEL: You told me what you played this morning, but I can't remember what it was.
KEPPEL: Well, I played the "Ave Maria" by Schubert, and parts of the Mendelssohn Concerto in E Minor.

BECHTEL: I would like to see the dress you wore; you said you saved it!

KEPPEL: Yes. I still have it.

BECHTEL: What would you say that your main goals in life have been?

KEPPEL: Well, all my life my main thing was to play the violin - to be the best violinist I could be. There wasn't a day that I didn't practice three or four hours a day. But when I had to give it up, then I turned to my writing. And since then my main goal is to leave my city something worthwhile. And I'm trying to do that with my historical information. And there's not a week goes by but people come and ask me about the history of Holland.

BECHTEL: I certainly think you've accomplished your goal already, and probably twice or three times over!

KEPPEL: I hope it may in the future do some good.

BECHTEL: How about... What are your days filled with recently?

KEPPEL: Oh, I'm always busy. In the morning, of course, I do my housework, and in the afternoon I write or sew. I'm always busy. I've been the historian of the Garden Club for 32 years.

BECHTEL: Oh, my goodness.

KEPPEL: And I've been the secretary of the Questers as long as they've been in existence - 21 years.

BECHTEL: With this elaborate home it must take quite a bit of time...

KEPPEL: Yes, it does. It keeps me busy. I do most of the work myself. In fact, all of the beautiful woodwork - I polish that all myself by hand.
BECHTEL: My word. I've heard that you keep this house as kind of a memorial to your father.

KEPPEL: Well, I have a... my mother's bedroom I have all my memorial... my historical things. And in there I've got the deed that my grandfather - when he bought his farm here in 1847 from the government. And he walked to Ionia and back to get that deed. And he payed a dollar and a quarter an acre. And now that farm is used for Russ's in Holland Heights. That was our farm. And my father when he was a boy - every day would go down there and work on the farm.

BECHTEL: How long have you lived in this house, then?

KEPPEL: This house was built in 1914. And the first home that I lived in was built before I was born - it was on 7th and College. And I remember so many things of the early parts of Holland... I remember the old Opera House. There was an Opera House in Holland from 1880, and it burned down in 1900. And I still remember it - I was four years old - and I still remember that Opera House. And I have a program of a play that was given there. It was a home talent play called, Who Killed Cock Robin? And many of the prominent people of Holland were in that play.

BECHTEL: Weren't you in that play, also?

KEPPEL: Yes, and I was three years old. I was in the play. It was called Who Killed Cock Robin?, and I was the fly. (laughter) And all I had to say was, "I am the fly with my little eye." (laughter)

BECHTEL: You've got quite a memory all right!

KEPPEL: Well, I remember that.

BECHTEL: That's great. Where was this located?

KEPPEL: It was located at 55 East 8th Street. And I remember the day when it burned down. The reason I remember it so well is because my father was a volunteer fireman. For twenty years he was a volunteer fireman. They were unpaid
caretakers of our city. And in 1883 the fire engine house was built. And then so many of the local boys joined as volunteer firemen. And I have pictures of all of those volunteer firemen, which I will leave to the city...sometime. My father became a fireman in 1885 and he was a fireman for twenty years. And I so well remember those fires. You see, we had - in his bedroom - he had a bell that would ring when there was a fire. And every night he would set his clothes so he could just jump into them. And then the fire bell would ring and the children would cry and the dog would bark and my father would jump into his clothes and run down to the corner in time to catch the fire engine as it went past. Of course, they had horses then, so they didn't go so fast as today.

BECHTEL: You couldn't jump on one of those today.

KEPPEL: No.

BECHTEL: How did they rig up the bell so that it would ring?

KEPPEL: I don't know. They had a bell in our bedroom which was connected with the fire engine. Personally, I don't know, but...

BECHTEL: So then he was involved in putting out the fire at the Opera House?

KEPPEL: Yes...all those big fires. I still remember them as a child. Of course, they didn't have the equipment like they have today. And there were so many fires. At one time I remember a little story about this... You see, my father was a deputy sheriff besides running the store. When he built his first house then he owed the mortgage. That's the only time in his life he ever owed anybody. So he worked in the daytime for his father and at night he worked as a deputy sheriff. And so I copied down so many of those stories of what happened. There happened a murder here.

BECHTEL: Oh, my.
KEPPEL: And a bank robbery. And a train robbery. And all those things I've recorded so they won't be forgotten. And one time many of the barns that they had the horses in were burned down. Seven, in fact. And then my father at that time was deputy sheriff. And he kind of thought that it was one of the builders...

BECHTEL: It was arson then...

KEPPEL: ...that wanted to rebuild the barns that did it. So he told the chief of police to go with him. And so, one night - for several nights - they hid under a barn that they thought would be the next one. And sure enough, they saw three men go and start that fire. So Chief Van Ry caught one and my father caught another, and then my father noticed who the third one was. So, after he took his man to jail, he went to the home of the third one to try to get him. And then the woman wouldn't let him in - his wife. And he said, "If you don't let me in I'll break open your door." So she let him in. And sure enough, there he was in bed with all his muddy clothes on.

BECHTEL: Oh...

KEPPEL: And so he took him to jail. And at the trial his brother swore that his brother was at his home that night - which he wasn't. And so he was sent to jail for perjury. I could even tell you the name, which I won't. (laughter)

BECHTEL: Well, we could probably look it up... I'm interested in what you think about the role of women in Holland. How has it changed through the years?

KEPPEL: Oh, Holland had some very great women through the years - many. One of the most outstanding ones was Mrs. George Kollen. She was the president of the Literary Club for ten years. She was the president of the State Literary Club. She was the superintendent of our church for ten years...she was a great woman. She was the sister of G. J. Diekema, who was a great orator who was in the Senate,
and was Minister to the Netherlands - G. J. Diekema.

BECHTEL: It sounds as if the qualities you admire in women are those women who are very active and community minded.

KEPPEL: Yes, I'm writing down many of their names now and telling about what they accomplished in the community. We're so apt to forget the women, and they contributed as much as the men did. Of course, now days this Women's Lib. is different than...

BECHTEL: What do you think of Women's Lib.?

KEPPEL: They go too far with it.

BECHTEL: I think I'm inclined to agree with you.

KEPPEL: In fact, I think that a whole lot of families would be better off if the women were more at home looking after the children.

BECHTEL: I noticed before that you used that old antage about "a woman's place is in the home." What do you think of that?

KEPPEL: Well, I think to a certain extent if they have children - young children... I think their place is home...that comes first.

BECHTEL: But Women's Lib. goes too far in your opinion, then?

KEPPEL: When they started the Women's Literary Club then they had a picture taken of those first women - I gave the Women's Literary Club the names of all those women. And if you look at the picture they all seem happier and more content than the women today do - I think they were more satisfied. (laughter)

BECHTEL: That could very well be. Would you say that your life has been very fulfilled?

KEPPEL: Oh, yes. I appreciate so much everything I've received.
BECHTEL: But I think you've given a great deal, too.

KEPPEL: Well, I've tried to. I've tried to do my part to make the city a little better...to furnish in my own way a little something toward the city.

BECHTEL: If there was anything you could do differently...

KEPPEL: And I always did it all for nothing - I never got paid for any fo my writings or playing for things. It was all done for nothing. Nowadays they have to be paid for everything. It used to provoke my father. He'd say, "Yes, you do it all for nothing, and strangers come in and we pay them"

BECHTEL: Yes. But I'm sure you've gained a lot more in satisfaction than they did in money.

KEPPEL: Yes, I think so too.

BECHTEL: Can you think of anything, perhaps throughout your life that you would do differently if you had the chance?

KEPPEL: Well, if I had to do anything...if I could I would have kept up my music. But I had to give that up because I had this bone disease. But that was my life's work and that was the thing I was trained for.

BECHTEL: Did the disease affect your hands, or...

KEPPEL: Well, I have a bone disease in my hip, and then it went to some of my fingers...

BECHTEL: So that would make the violin very difficult...

KEPPEL: Yes. That's why the doctors advised that I give that up. But I never mourned about it, I just went to other things. I went to my writing and needlework. All of this needlework at home I made.

BECHTEL: I think that's characteristic of the determination you've shown throughout
your life.

KEPPEL: Well, I hope so. I've tried to do my best.

BECHTEL: Well, can you think of anything else to add this afternoon?

KEPPEL: Well, I can't think of anything particular.

BECHTEL: OK. Well, thank you so much for taking time to sit down and talk.

KEPPEL: Well, I'm glad to see young women like you that are interested in these things.

BECHTEL: Well, it's been a delight to get to know you...

KEPPEL: Yes. I'm leaving all my writings that I've written to the library and to the museum in care of Dr. Bruins.

BECHTEL: Well, you've certainly made a contribution. Thank you very much.
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Preserving the heritage--
Miss Keppel's destiny

By Ann Hungerford
Sentinel Weekend editor

It's 3 a.m. and Ruth Keppel is awake.

Awakened from a sound sleep by some unconscious thoughts, Miss Keppel begins transcribing stories of early Holland told by her father. She devotes the remainder of the evening to writing a long forgotten tale.

That, she believes, is her destiny. And for years she has been fulfilling it, her files bulging with manuscripts she wrote and typed herself.

Fearing that historical insights would remain buried if not related by word-of-mouth, Albert Keppel told story upon story to his impressionable daughter.

There are, the 83-year-old Holland historian believes, numerous people in the area older than she, who remember little about the past.

Details readily fill her lucid mind. Little, if anything, has been forgotten.

Miss Keppel credits her uncanny memory to desire. "I've always wanted to remember everything," says the lady who has served as historian of the Holland Garden Club for 29 years.

She vividly remembers fire destroying a Holland opera house when she was a small child, a typical example of her recall.

"Everything is in my memory," she explains. "The reason I can remember is that I'm so interested in Holland. That's why." Even her sisters, she says, remember comparatively little.

Occasionally as her recent late night writing session testifies, she recalls new material from her father's stories.

And fortunately for the community she is willing complete texts of her materials to The Netherlands Museum and Herrick Library.

Several of her stories were compiled for a book entitled "Trees to Tulips," published in time for the 100th anniversary of the community. To her delight the book in still utilized in several local history classes. But copies are scarce and she treasures the remaining editions.

Miss Keppel displays equal pleasure in the recognition she receives for her contributions to the community.

Recently she was presented with a pair of wooden shoes by Mayor Lou Hallacy in recognition for her contribution to the Garden Club. Complete books from the club are kept in her home, carefully and beautifully filed and bound.

Not only the Garden Club Books but numerous reminders
of her childhood and life surround her on her East Tenth St. home.

The daughter of Albert and Kate Keppel was born March 22, 1896. All of her grandparents came from The Netherlands. Her grandfather Teunis Keppel came to America in 1845, two years before the arrival of Dr. Van Raalte.

In 1847 he and two other Dutch boys walked from Chicago to Holland intent upon joining the Van Raalte party. Her other grandparents arrived the same year.

In the spring of 1847 Teunis Keppel purchased 40 acres of land from the government for $1.25 an acre. The farm was located one-half mile east of the first log cabin and is still owned by the Keppel family. Keppel walked to Ionia and back, a distance of 120 miles to secure the deed.

Today the deed, signed by President Zachery Taylor, hangs in Miss Keppel's home, a framed reminder of her heritage.

Along with the antiques which are liberally scattered throughout the room and including a spinning wheel which came over on one of the early boats, the room contains many of her handquilted needlepoint quilts, many cutwork tablecloths made of linen with matching napkins.

Her interest in needlework began upon discovery of a bone disease which left her unable to play the violin.

An accomplished violinist by her junior high school years, Miss Keppel rarely saw a week pass that she didn't play for some local event. In 1909 she played for the first time for the Women's Literary Club.

In 1912 she played for the Hope College commencement. In addition she played the violin for 14 Holland High School commencements and for ten years, the processional she composed was used by Holland High School.

Upon graduating from Holland High School in 1914 she played the Mendelssohn Concerto in E Minor. She attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music for two years and graduated from Chicago Musical College. There she studied under the great Dutch artist Leon Sametini.

For many years she taught violing in Holland to a large class of students as well as directing the Holland Junior and Senior High School orchestras.

When Princess Juliana of the Netherlands came to Holland in 1941, Miss Keppel was invited to play her violin at a banquet held at the Warm Friend Tavern.

A photograph of Miss Keppel in her "Princess dress" so named by her for the occasion is among her memorabilia.

When a bone disease forced her to give up playing the violin she turned to needlework and writing.

Although she had limited experience writing, Miss Keppel took it upon herself to begin compiling the stories.

Her father, she says, loved the city and was concerned that the early history would be forgotten. His father Teunis, right hand man to Dr. A. C. Van Raalte, told him the tales which he in turn passed on down to his daughter.

Never, she says, are her fingers idle. Even when watching television she is constantly working on her beautiful needlepoint creations.

"My fingers always have to be busy," she concedes her mania for keeping active and healthy.

But keeping fingers busy costs considerably. She recalls chiding from her mother who suggested that she slow her work pace.

"You finish one project and then you just have to go out and buy new materials," she was told.

Because of the violin, her fingers learned to work fast and she finds it impossible to accomplish anything at a slow pace. She counts to her credit ten quilts, four hook rugs, 50 table clothes, dozens of napkins, and numerous needlepoint pictures, many of which she purchased from China or Spain and all of which she framed and hung in her beautiful home.

"I don't think I've ever been lazy," she comments. "That wouldn't be good."

She has been secretary of the Etta Fox chapter of Questers since it was organized in 1959. Miss Keppel also wrote a brief history of Holland for a pamphlet which was recently published and is entitled "A Walking Tour of Historical Sites of Early Holland, Michigan."

As a freshman in high school, she wrote an article on ragtime music. Now she writes of history, of the Kolony. But her love of music is as deep as ever. Even her favorite needlepoint picture depicts a violin.

Teaching herself to type, Miss Keppel will devote many hours to typing a copy of her stories to perfection. "I never thought the time would come when I would learn to write," she says today.

Deciding that if the city wishes to convert the old fire station to a museum, Miss Keppel is anxious to donate portraits of each of the early volunteer firemen to the museum. That collection would include her father who also served as a deputy sheriff for the community.

She remembers early days when the firebell in the firehouse was connected to their own home and her father would rush to catch the fire truck. "It's all in my mind," she reiterates. And now much of it is on paper.

Appearing in a local production of "Who Killed Cock Robin?" when she was three, little Ruth's only line was "I am the fly with my little eye."

That little fly grew up into a beautiful lady with two wide-open eyes and a sense of destiny. To her falls the task of remembering and relating.

She has the eyes...and the mind.
Ruth Keppel at graduation with her violin...
...and today with her needlepoint creation.
Selected Historical Sites of early Holland, Michigan

A WALKING TOUR

Prepared by the Holland Area Historical Advisory Council in cooperation with the Netherlands Museum of Holland, Michigan.

Spring 1979
SECTION C KEY

The Netherlands Museum Corner Twelfth Street and Central Avenue 12
This brick and stone Victorian home overlooking Centennial Park was built in 1889 by Dr. Henry Kremers. He was not only an active physician, but also served as Holland's mayor in 1889 and helped to organize the Ottawa County Building and Loan Association. The structure served as Holland's first city hospital from 1919 to 1927 and was also a Knickerbocker Fraternity house for a time. The Netherlands Museum has been located here since 1939.

Ninth St. Christian Ref. Church (Pillar Church) Corner Ninth street and College Avenue 13
Soon after the Dutch immigrants arrived in Holland in 1847, they erected a log church in what is now the area of Pilgrim Home Cemetery. By 1853 the congregation felt the need to build a new structure closer to the city. Under the leadership of the Rev. Van Raalte, the Pillar Church was built between 1853 and 1856. This Greek Revival style church with its imposing entrance was designed by architect Jacobus Schrader. The bell which hangs in its steeple was purchased by popular subscription in 1850 and hung at the corner of 10th and College. It was used to announce services, burials, fires and the hours of the working day.

Hope College Campus College Avenue between 10th and 12th Streets 14
Hope College arose from Dr. Van Raalte's dream of a church-affiliated college in his colony. It started as the Pioneer School in 1851, grew to the Holland Academy in 1857 and, under the determined guidance of President Phillip Phelps, received a Charter of Incorporation as a College of Liberal Arts on May 14, 1866.

VORHEES HALL. In 1902, then college president Gerrit Kollen reported the need for a women's dormitory. Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Vorhees of Clinton, N.J. gave $100,000 in 1905 on an annuity basis to be used for a new dormitory. With additional college funds, the building was completed in 1907. Today, only a part of Vorhees Hall is used for college offices.

PRESIDENT'S HOUSE. This Queen Anne style home was begun in 1887, but due to the lack of money, was not completed until 1892 when it was occupied by college President Gerrit Kollen. A large porch was added between 1911 and 1918.

VAN VLECK HALL. Completed in 1858, this is the oldest standing building on the campus. It provided the first permanent facility for the Holland Academy and is named after the Rev. John Van Vleck, academy principal from 1855-59, who designed it and supervised the construction. The college is now involved in a fund drive to authentically refurbish Van Vleck Hall.

VAN RAALTE HALL. Dedicated in 1904, this building has served as a classroom structure but is now the administrative office building for Hope college. It was named after the Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte. Note the decorated gables and waverly stone arch.

GRAVES HALL. Dedicated in 1894, this was originally the college library and chapel. The building is named after principal donor Nathan F. Graves, a member of the Reformed Church of America from Syracuse, N.Y. The structure is built of native Waverly stone quarried a short distance east of Holland. A classic example of Romanesque Revival.

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY South side of 12th Street just east of College Avenue
The second of two seminaries of the Reformed Church of America, Western began as an offshoot of the theology department at Hope college in 1866. New Brunswick Seminary in New Jersey was already established by the Reformed church, but it was felt that a second seminary in the west could better meet the needs of the immigrant churches here. In 1889, Western became an entirely separate institution from Hope College although it continued to use the college's facilities.
Third Reformed Church Corner Pine and Twelfth Street
The congregation of Third Reformed Church was organized in 1867 when the members of Holland's First Reformed Church decided that they should split their large membership into two smaller churches. The first building was completed in 1868. The bell of this church sounded the first alarm of the 1871 fire. During the rebuilding process in 1872, a strong wind blew apart the framework, the scattered timbers of which were used in the construction of the house at 121 W. Twelfth. The rebuilt church was dedicated in 1874 and was carefully restored in 1968. It is on the Michigan Historic Registry and the National Register of Historic Buildings. The architecture is Carpenter's Gothic style. Chancel furniture is from a New York City church that had received it as a gift from the daughter-in-law of President Abraham Lincoln.

Post House 80 W. Eleventh Street
This home was constructed in the early 1870's, following the Holland fire, by Mr. Henry Post, an early justice of the peace, U.S. Commissioner, and Holland's first postmaster. He settled in Holland shortly before the Dutch arrived. This house is of Italianate style and was built of yellow Veneklassen brick made in nearby Zeeland. The low-pitched roof rises to a flat deck accessible from attic stairs and indicating that the house at one time probably had a cupola or rail-enclosed observation area. Its four chimneys are evidence of the earlier style of heating. The general opulence of the home is indicated by the former servant's quarters at the rear which is now an apartment.

Hope Reformed Church 79 W. Eleventh Street
Hope Church, the first English-speaking church in the area, was built in 1862-64 on property donated by the Rev. Van Raalte. The original structure was destroyed in the 1871 fire and was rebuilt. The 1874 building of Rural Gothic architecture with slate siding is still visible from the east side. Growth of the congregation necessitated and expansion toward 11th street in 1902. The stepped gables of this addition are characteristic of Dutch architecture and may be seen on several other buildings in Holland. The rose windows and art glass memorial windows were added in the early 1920's.

Centenniel Park 10th to 12th Streets and Central to River Avenues
Holland began as a planned community of 400 acres centered on the area which was at the mouth of the Black River (now also called the Macatawa River). The first lots were platted by an Allegan surveyor, a Mr. Bassett, in 1847. Eighth street, the first street drawn, was to be the main street. What is now Centenniel Park was the area set aside as a market square for community trading. In 1876 the Hollanders undertook the landscaping of Market Square and renamed it in honor of the nation's centennial celebration.
SECTION A KEY

Essenburg-Coatsworth House 236 W. Ninth Street 1
This home is one of the few elegant early homes of Holland that survived the 1871 fire. Little is known of the original builder, a Mr. Coatsworth, who may have been a partner in an early lumber company. From 1880 until 1892 the home was owned and occupied by Prof. Gerrit Kollen who was later a president of Hope College. The home is characterized by lle de France Provincial designed with the second floor enclosed by a concave Mansard roof. A roof cupola was removed prior to 1920. The interior stairway leading up from the entry hall has a black walnut balustrade and rail. The original basement floor was made of wood planks, some of which still remain. Built in 1863.

Cappon House 228 W. Ninth Street 2
Issac Cappon, an early Holland industrialist and the first mayor of the incorporated city of Holland, built this modified French Provincial style home in 1872-73. The foundation of the frame house is made of Waverly stone which was quarried just east of Holland. The grandeur of this 19th century home is reflected in some of the interior features including ash and walnut woodwork, decorative composition wainscot in the entrance hall and up the open stairway, and cast plaster filigree ceiling trim from which the chandelier-style oil lamps were originally suspended. This home is the best preserved and most original in character of the more elegant homes built during the Victorian era in Holland.

Boneburg House 190 W. Ninth Street 3
This settlers' home of Early American Provincial style was built in 1864 by The Rev. Albertus Van Raalte, founder of the city of Holland, on a speculative basis. At that time this area was west of the city limits. Early owner Mrs. Dolly Charter traded with the indians who came up the creek from Black Lake. The creek saved this house from the devastating fire of 1871. Two lean-to additions have been added over the years to enlarge the basic structure which consisted of a living-dining area, a small bedroom and a pantry-structure on the first floor with two more bedrooms upstairs. This home presents a view of the type of home which would have been owned by the average family in early Holland.

John Cappon Home 268 Maple Avenue 4
When this Georgian Colonial home was built for Mr. Cappon it had a large front porch with white Corinthian columns. John was the son of Issac Cappon and his wealth was reflected in the quality of the building, from the lovely oak woodwork to the leaded and stained glass windows. The second owner was August H. Landwehr, owner of the Holland Furnace Company and the Warm Friend Hotel on Eighth street. Kenneth Vander Heuval, a musician, bought the house in 1954. Later his wife, as a widow, moved to Washington, D.C. to become President Richard Nixon's wife Pat's personal secretary. The original front porch of the home deteriorated and was removed.

Abraham M. Kanter Home (Now St. Francis de Sales parsonage) 284 Maple Avenue 5
This home is of modified Tudor Style architecture which combines both the French and English influences. This lovely home was begun in 1883 by Mr. Kanter but was sold to Abraham Leenhouts at the turn of the century at which time it was completed. Dr. Leenhouts was a progressive man who was the first in Holland to electrify his home. He treated patients at this location in what is now the library. The sun room addition has a beamed ceiling with gargoyles at the outer edges as well as a charming water fountain.

Gerrit J. Diekema Home 134 W. Twelfth Street 6
This home, built in 1925 for G.J. Diekema, is an American Colonial with western-style wood framing. The structure replaced his earlier Victorian home on the same site. Mr. Diekema was a descendant of the local Dutch pioneers and was a partner in a local law firm. Diekema served twice as a state representative and was very active in the Republican party. Mr. Diekema served as Minister plenipotentiary (ambassadorial equivalent) to The Netherlands in the 1920's. The neighboring Third Reformed Church acquired the house in 1960 from the Henry Meantz's and still uses it today as a parsonage.

Jacob Zuidema Cottage 121 W. Twelfth Street 7
An American Provincial Cottage style designed with wood platform framing, this home was built from the timbers of the original Third Reformed Church during the post-fire reconstruction. It has beams 12" square visible in the basement which is partial brick-curved, soft and brown, possibly Benington. Originally there was a front porch which has been removed but the exterior is intact as are the native Waverly stones in the foundation.
The history of Holland, Michigan is one of the most fascinating tales of any city in Michigan. It is a story of how within one year seventeen hundred immigrants from the Netherlands braved the dangers of an unknown future to settle in a dense forest, and by sheer will power to develop that locality so that it has eventually become one of the beauty spots of America.

On February 9, 1847 a small group of Dutch men and women arrived in Holland, Michigan. They came from Allegan by a sleigh driven by an oxen team. During the summer a constant stream of people came to the colony, as many as eight hundred. By October of 1847 there were seventeen hundred Hollanders in this community.

The first thing these sturdy pioneers did was to build two log cabins. In the latter part of the summer of 1847, the first log church was constructed. It was located on the present site of the Pilgrim Home Cemetery on East 16th Street. This log church was used until 1859 when the Pillar Church was built. This beautiful structure is still standing on the corner of Ninth Street and College Avenue. It is one of the few buildings that were saved when on October 9, 1871, the toil of years was undone by a fire that destroyed two hundred and forty-three homes and seventy-three stores.

Dr. Albertus Van Raalte was the founder of this community. Our streets were laid out by Dr. Van Raalte. Where Centennial Park now stands Van Raalte designated a Market Place. What is now Central Avenue he had named Market Street.

As immigrants arrived from The Netherlands, he directed them to different locations, arranged and named as they are in The Netherlands. Thus a newcomer would be locating in the town from which he came in The Netherlands and would be situated with people of the same background.

Whereas in 1847 Holland, Michigan was a land of trees, today it is the land of tulips. If the early pioneers of Holland, Michigan could come back for our Tulip Time, how pleased they would be. It would mean that they had built a city that was a worthy place for their children's children to live.