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Kleis, Clarence Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College

Nancy Swinyard

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LIVING HERITAGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Mr. Clarence Kleis

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Hope College Archives Council
Holland, Michigan
1977

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Preface

Interviewee: Mr. Clarence Kleis

Interview I: June 24, 1977
Mr. Kleis' residence in Kalamazoo, Michigan

Interviewer: Miss Nancy A. Swinyard
A.B. Hope College, 1977

CLARENCE KLEIS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Clarence Kleis was born in 1898 in Holland, Michigan, one of eight children born to H. W. Kleis, a farmer, and his wife, Jane Van Appeldorn. After attending North Holland Elementary School, Mr. Kleis continued his education at Hope Preparatory School, and graduated from Hope College in 1919.

Mr. Kleis taught at Hamilton High School from 1919 until 1920. He then taught math and physics at Saugatuck High School from 1920 to 1921. Gladys Kronemeyer, a teacher from Hamilton, Michigan, became his wife on June 16, 1921, and they had five children: John Kleis died in World War II, and is survived by Myra Kleis Berry, born in 1923, Paul M. Kleis, 1926, Rev. Carl M. Kleis, 1932, and Glenyce Russcher, 1934.

After teaching mathematics at Hope Preparatory School for two years, Mr. Kleis taught physics at Hope College from 1923 until he retired in 1964. In 1928, he earned his A.M. in physics from the University of Michigan. While at Hope, Mr. Kleis was an active faculty member, serving on the Scholarship Committee (1936 to 1964), the Administrative Committee (1945 to 1964), and being chairman of the Athletic Committee (1945 to 1953).

Having viewed Hope Preparatory School and Hope College from the perspectives of student and faculty, Mr. Kleis discusses these institutions in regard to their atmospheres and the shaping forces of the presidents he knew. Although his responses are often brief, they are particularly interesting as an indication of what was general faculty knowledge about certain policies of the Lubbers administration, such as faculty selection, student government, Hope's participation in the Michigan College Foundation, as well as the dynamics of the administration itself. He also mentions the early development of the Physics Department.

INTERVIEW I

SWINYARD: Let's begin with an introductory question. You graduated from Hope in 1919.

KLEIS: That's right.

SWINYARD: What do you remember about President Vennema and President Dimment?

KLEIS: Yes, President Vennema was the president for seven of the years I was a student at Hope College. He started in 1911, the same time I enrolled in the Preparatory School, and he left just one year before I graduated, in 1918. I graduated in 1919.

SWINYARD: Did you have any contacts with him?

KLEIS: Not very much, no.

SWINYARD: How about with Dr. Dimment?

KLEIS: Oh, Dr. Dimment. Yes, Dr. Dimment and Dr. Wichers were both teaching in both the Preparatory Department and in the college when I was a student there, so I had lots of contacts with both of them, and then later they were presidents while I was teaching there.

SWINYARD: Could you talk a little bit about them?

KLEIS: I was just kind of anticipating a sort of a question like that. All I can say is that I had nothing but the highest respect for both of

them, as I had for Dr. Lubbers, who followed them. Dr. Lubbers never was my teacher, but Dr. Dimment was my teacher in Greek, and Dr. Wichers was my teacher in mathematics and Latin and history and biology (laughter). They were both excellent men, and I had nothing but the highest respect for them.

SWINYARD: Let's talk a little bit about the Prep School. I know that you attended there and you also taught mathematics at the Prep School.

KLEIS: That's right. I graduated from the college in 1919 and then I was out in high schools for two years, and then in 1921 Dr. Dimment invited me to come and teach in the Preparatory School. I did that for two years, and then the position in the Physics Department opened up, and he asked me to take over the physics work. That was in both the College and High School Departments. At that time, the total faculty in the College and Preparatory Departments numbered 21, and most of them taught in both departments. A little while later they separated a bit, I think, because of a rule of the North Central Association that faculty members might teach only in the college or in the Preparatory School. I don't remember just what year that was, but the college people were not allowed to teach in the Preparatory School any more. I think it still continued until 1934.

SWINYARD: The Prep School?

KLEIS: Yes.

SWINYARD: That's correct. What was the reason for its decline?

KLEIS: That's a hard question. The high schools were getting so much more popular, and they offered a more varied program. The program at

the Preparatory School was quite strictly an academic program, pretty high caliber. Our students usually stood pretty well in comparison with those who came from the high schools, but that gradually dropped off. When I entered in 1911, the enrollment in the Preparatory School was larger than in the college, but that changed.

SWINYARD: Is there any other kind of a comparison that you could make between the Prep School and the other high schools in the area?

KLEIS: Well, it was more strictly a classical institution: Latin and Greek were emphasized very strongly, so that in the Preparatory School I studied Latin for four years and Greek for two years and then some more in the college.

SWINYARD: When you were at the Prep School and then as a student at Hope, which people did you feel really shaped the college and the school? Which people did you greatly respect, and why?

KLEIS: I think we've already mentioned the two. There were others there, but Dr. Dimment and Dr. Wichers were outstanding. They were unique.

SWINYARD: You would like to leave it at that?

KLEIS: Yes.

SWINYARD: Could you talk more about the Wichers period? I know that you both were elders at Third Church, and you knew him pretty well.

KLEIS: Oh, yes, we served together at Third Church. Well, as I said, he was teaching in the Preparatory School first and then in 1913 the chair in the Department of History became vacant, and so they asked him to take over the work in history, and that was his work as long as he

taught at the college until he became, I forgot the exact year now, but after he had been teaching there for some time, he was called to become the cashier of the First National Bank. That must have been somewhere around 1924, '25. No, a little later than that.

SWINYARD: It was 1925.

KLEIS: Then in 1930, when Dr. Dimment resigned, they called Dr. Wichers back to become the president of the college, and he became president at a rather unfortunate time, because he was the president during the Depression. Financial problems were pretty stringent, but he weathered them all. There was only one building built while he was president -- that was true of Dr. Dimment, too. Dr. Dimment built the Chapel and Dr. Wichers built the science building which is now Lubbers Hall.

SWINYARD: During the time of the Depression, there was talk of closing the school, wasn't there?

KLEIS: I never heard of it.

SWINYARD: No?

KLEIS: No.

SWINYARD: From what you knew of the presidents, what did you perceive as their goals for the college? Covering all of the presidents that you knew.

KLEIS: Well, they were presidents each in their own unique way, as was true of Dr. Lubbers, too, who followed them. They had unique qualities of leadership. They differed somewhat. Dr. Dimment was a very keen, classical scholar. I don't know if you've heard of or read his translation

of the Book of Job.

SWINYARD: Yes, I've heard of it.

KLEIS: I have a copy. It's a scholarly work. Dr. Wichers, I guess, struggled mostly with the financial problems.

SWINYARD: Would you say that they had the same goal for the college?

KLEIS: I would think so, yes.

SWINYARD: Could you verbalize what that was?

KLEIS: Well, I think they were all striving to make Hope College one of the best Christian liberal arts colleges in the country.

SWINYARD: My main body of questions deals with your work at Hope during the Lubbers administration. You were on the Administrative Committee from 1945 until you retired.

KLEIS: That's right.

SWINYARD: And so you had a lot of contact with Dr. Lubbers.

KLEIS: I was on the Commencement Committee for 43 years from the time I joined the Preparatory School until I retired, and then I was chairman of the Athletic Committee for several years. Yes, that was an innovation with Dr. Lubbers. Before that time, the faculty was small. We had faculty meetings once a month then. All affairs were taken care of at those faculty meetings through committees, of course. But when Dr. Lubbers came, he instituted the idea of having an administrative committee, and I was asked to be a member of that.

SWINYARD: Let's back up to the area of finances for a while. Before Dr.

Lubbers came, when funds were being raised for the science building in 1939, you were part of a fundraising project for that and you were in charge of the Holland area.

KLEIS: Yes, in charge of the Holland area, in charge of the Third Church program, and then seven of us went to northwest Iowa and canvassed all the Reformed Churches there, family by family.

SWINYARD: The campaign was so successful that the building was dedicated in 1941 without any debts.

KLEIS: That's right. I hope they'll be able to do that with the physical education building.

SWINYARD: Me, too!

KLEIS: They have a little ways to go yet. But it might interest you to know that in that campaign out in Orange City, Iowa, or in northwestern Iowa, the smallest gift I received was 35 cents -- from a widow -- and the biggest gift I received was one of 40 dollars. A man out on a tractor in the field wrote a check for 40 dollars and that was the biggest one we got on that whole campaign.

SWINYARD: It all adds up. Later on, under President Lubbers, there were plans for the three Reformed Church colleges to plan collectively. There were two campaigns, the Eendragt Campaign and the College Roll Call, but they weren't successful in raising the amount of money that was needed. Was there some difference between the program that you were involved in and these two?

KLEIS: No, it was a different time. I wasn't involved in that at all. I think Dr. De Velder headed up that Eendragt Campaign, but it was a more

denomination-wide program.

SWINYARD: Do you know why these programs didn't raise money the way the one you were involved in did?

KLEIS: No, I don't. The times, of course -- they were just coming out of the Depression.

SWINYARD: In the late 1940's when the Michigan Colleges Foundation was started, a novel idea was put into practice -- soliciting funds from industry for non-tax-supported institutions. How did you view this plan? Did you think it was good?

KLEIS: Oh, yes, it has proven itself. I had nothing to do with that. Dr. Raymond worked on that with Dr. Lubbers, but Dr. Raymond was the faculty representative on that drive.

SWINYARD: The first couple of years of Hope's participation in it, they didn't get any money at all. In the third year, after it was organized, the money came in. What about those first two years? Were things on campus on edge about it?

KLEIS: I never heard of it.

SWINYARD: There were no problems in the decisions to maintain Hope's involvement in the Foundation?

KLEIS: I don't think so.

SWINYARD: After World War Two, President Lubbers appointed more faculty members than any other president because of the great number of students that were coming to the college, and he had to keep pace with it.

KLEIS: Only one of them is left.

SWINYARD: Only one?

KLEIS: Dr. Hollenbach.

SWINYARD: In the English Department.

KLEIS: That's right. Dr. Hollenbach and Dr. Brand, Jim Prins and Henry Ten Hoor and Ed Brand, and there were a couple of others that I don't recall just now. But I think he appointed in midyear seven additional faculty members, so I guess Dr. Hollenbach is the oldest one there now in point of service.

SWINYARD: What do you know about President Lubbers' methods of selection and placement of faculty?

KLEIS: You mean at the college itself?

SWINYARD: Yes.

KLEIS: No reason to criticize it at all.

SWINYARD: Do you know what his basis for hiring might be?

KLEIS: No. That was left pretty well to the president and a committee of the Board of Trustees, I think. Individual faculty members had very little to do with that.

SWINYARD: So nothing was known generally, then?

KLEIS: No.

SWINYARD: Because I was going to ask you if you could draw a comparison between Dr. Lubbers' interviews and the one you had with Dr. Dimment.

KLEIS: (laughter) I can tell you about that interview very briefly. We met in the restaurant downtown one Saturday. He said, "Kleis, drop in to see me sometime, will you?" So we made an appointment for the next Tuesday night. And he said, "Mr. Ten Haken is leaving. Would you like to take his place?" (laughter) That was the extent of the interview.

SWINYARD: O.K. A year or two after President Lubbers took office there seemed to be a conflict with the Board of Trustees, as evidenced by the fact that a petition was going around among faculty members for signatures in support of him in his policies. Do you remember that?

KLEIS: I remember that distinctly.

SWINYARD: What incidents precipitated that?

KLEIS: I don't think I can recall that. Once in a while you heard a little talk about so and so being a Wichers man or a Lubbers man, and I didn't sign the petition. I told Dr. Lubbers very frankly that I was both a Wichers and a Lubbers man, but first of all I was a Hope College man. I wasn't going to put myself in a position of selecting the one or the other. Each had his own strong points of leadership. I never felt any different but what I could work with them 100 percent.

SWINYARD: So you don't remember exactly what was going on at the time, what was in the air?

KLEIS: No, I wouldn't want to commit myself on that. I don't really remember enough of it.

SWINYARD: Do you know what happened to that petition after it went around?

KLEIS: I think very little came of it.

SWINYARD: Did that frustrate the people who had signed it or not signed it?

KLEIS: Never heard of it.

SWINYARD: It just disappeared, and there was no talk of it. How do you think the fact that that went around affected the president?

KLEIS: I don't think it affected him at all.

SWINYARD: Do you think he ignored it?

KLEIS: I don't think he ignored it, but he didn't let it bother him.

SWINYARD: I found out that in the Lubbers administration, the offices of dean of the college, business manager, and a few others were created. Dr. C.E. Wimmer first held the office of dean of the college and Professor Paul Mc Lean held the office of business manager. A year later, these two had been replaced by Dr. John Hollenbach and Dr. Bruce Raymond, respectively. Do you know why these men were replaced?

KLEIS: No, I don't. Dr. Wimmer went to, I think, Augustana College.

SWINYARD: So there were no undercurrents that you knew of?

KLEIS: No.

SWINYARD: Could you talk more about President Lubbers' relation to Bruce Raymond and Henry Steffens, the business manager and the treasurer? Did you know anything about the way they worked?

KLEIS: All I know is that they worked in pretty close harmony. Dr. Raymond represented the college. He was the business manager, and he represented the college on their business association. Mr. Steffens attended to his business as a treasurer. I didn't ever hear any complaints about

him.

SWINYARD: There were no conflicts in the perception of their roles?

KLEIS: Not that I ever heard of.

SWINYARD: Later, when Rein Visscher was business manager and Henry Steffens was treasurer and John Hollenbach was dean and Milton Hinga was dean of students, did everything run smoothly at that time, too?

KLEIS: I think so, yes. I don't know if you've heard about the rather serious accident that Dr. Lubbers was in coming back in a snowstorm, so that he couldn't act as president for a little while. Mr. Hinga and I guess it was Miss Reeverts took over and everything went smoothly.

SWINYARD: What did you see as the goals and purposes of Hope College while you were there?

KLEIS: I think it was, as I said a moment ago, to provide a strong Christian liberal arts training in all the departments. Up to 1912, 75 percent of the graduates of the college went into the ministry or missionary work. Soon after that, the science departments began to grow and became pretty strong. We sent a lot of people to graduate school so that our record of Ph.D.'s in the sciences stood very high amongst the colleges of the nation.

SWINYARD: When President Lubbers hired John Hollenbach, Morry Rider, and Bob Cavanaugh, who were not of Reformed Church background, did you see a difference in the direction of the college?

KLEIS: No. I'm going to say what I've said to many people. Dr. Hollenbach and Dr. Cavanaugh and Mr. Hinga were as truly representative of Hope College as any graduates of the college ever were, and were as loyal to the college

and to the whole program of the college. They were all men with whom it was a great pleasure to be associated.

SWINYARD: How did you perceive the relation of the Reformed Church to Hope College?

KLEIS: Well, that was very much stronger in its earlier years, and the support of the college was better then. Of course, the college budget was much smaller then. But during the last couple of decades, that has changed again. I understand that church contributions have come up very nicely. Of course, that would be true because of the growth of the college and the fact that the students come from so many of the churches.

SWINYARD: Let's talk about student government and what you saw of it, being a faculty member. Under Dr. Lubbers, Nexus was formed to discuss issues that no one else wanted to discuss. As you viewed it, how successful was that group?

KLEIS: I had no contacts with that at all. We had no serious problems on the campus of disciplinary action.

SWINYARD: What kinds of issues do you think they handled?

KLEIS: I'm not in a position to say.

SWINYARD: Do you think they actually accomplished things, or were they a nominal group?

KLEIS: I don't think I can commit myself to that because I had no contacts with them at all.

SWINYARD: When there were tensions in the student body, Dr. Lubbers' method of dealing with that was to hold a luncheon at the Warm Friend with

a cross-section of students to iron out the problems. How did you and the other faculty view this strategy of his?

KLEIS: Well, it worked, and we weren't in a position to criticize, at least I never was critical of it. Dr. Lubbers was a great autocrat of the coffee cup, and that worked out in his relationships with faculty members and with students and with the town.

SWINYARD: So there was no feeling of restiveness among the faculty?

KLEIS: No.

SWINYARD: Did you see these luncheons as solving problems in a real way, or just cooling everyone off and letting it ride?

KLEIS: I don't recall any serious problems.

SWINYARD: As you said, President Lubbers' method of dealing with the faculty when any problems arose was a similar manner -- having dinner before the faculty meetings. Did anyone raise the issue about whether or not this was a legitimate use of college money?

KLEIS: I never heard it.

SWINYARD: Did you feel that the money was well spent?

KLEIS: I didn't know that there was any money spent. (laughter)

SWINYARD: Well, the dinner was at the college expense.

KLEIS: I suppose so, but the president is allowed a certain amount of expense money, I understand. But he was in an altogether different position than Dr. Wichers. Money began to come in very much better during his administration than during the Depression.

SWINYARD: Let's move to President Vander Werf. You were only around with him for a year. Do you remember anything about him, his policies, personality?

KLEIS: Very little.

SWINYARD: Did you not have much contact with him?

KLEIS: Very little contact, just that one year before I retired. He had been a student of mine, a very top-notch student. He had some innovations but I didn't have any great part in any of them.

SWINYARD: Could you comment at all on his presidency?

KLEIS: No, I'm not in a position to do that.

SWINYARD: Do you know if he had any different sort of goal for Hope than, say, Dr. Lubbers had, with his strong science background in mind?

KLEIS: No, I don't think so. He found it a little bit hard to delegate authority. When Dr. Dimment or Dr. Wichers or Dr. Lubbers gave an assignment, they expected you to carry through and didn't bother you much while you were doing that. Dr. Vander Werf was more a man who liked to keep his fingers in everything.

SWINYARD: And did he do that well?

KLEIS: I'm not in a position to say that. It aroused a little hostility here and there, I think.

SWINYARD: You served on the Scholarship Committee from 1936 to 1964. How did the criteria for awarding these scholarships develop? Was there a change in the type of student?

KLEIS: Well, we had the two kinds of grants. The scholarship grant, which was based on academics alone, and then we also had the grants in aid given to people who couldn't quite qualify for scholarship grants. It's almost subject to smile at now, the kind of program we had then. The tuition at that time was 125 dollars a year, and so a 65 dollar scholarship would be considered a pretty good scholarship based on academic ability alone.

SWINYARD: Is there anything more that you'd like to add about that?

KLEIS: That scholarship program has grown so tremendously that I don't even recognize it now. During the Depression, I also was chairman of the NYA Committee, the National Youth Organization, and we got from the federal government ten thousand dollars a year to help needy students. It developed pretty much into working in laboratories and leaf raking for the janitors and so forth, but quite a few people received assistance on that program.

SWINYARD: From the time that you were a student and then a professor, did you notice a difference in the types of students who came to Hope?

KLEIS: Yes. As I said, in the early years, a large portion of them were preparing for the ministry or for missionary work. I think the student body was more preponderantly a Reformed Church background than it was a little bit later.

SWINYARD: Tell me about your work in the Physics Department. Did you succeed Mr. Yntema?

KLEIS: No, Mr. Yntema retired in 1916 and he died in '20. Mr. Evans taught there for some years and Dr. Pietenpol-- I don't remember the exact years, but they both filled in there. Then in 1923, Mr. Evans resigned to go back into printing at Holland High School, and I was asked to take over the work in Physics, which, at that time, was one class in the Preparatory

School and one class in the College Department.

SWINYARD: Could you talk more about the development of the department?

KLEIS: We tried to add a little bit. After a couple of years, this other ruling of the North Central Association went into effect so that I was no longer allowed to teach in the Preparatory Department. Then for a while, I helped to teach in the Mathematics Department, but the Physics Department grew so that it became a full time job again. But I was alone in the Physics Department until Dr. Frissel came in 1948.

SWINYARD: When did Albert Lampen come in?

KLEIS: Albert Lampen came in 1918.

SWINYARD: Do you remember much about him?

KLEIS: He and I were very close friends. We worked together in the college. Physics and mathematics, of course, were very closely related. He had been a teacher of physics in Washburn College, and so was very much interested in the Physics Department, too, and we worked together in Third Church in consistory and the Sunday school, and we were very good personal friends.

SWINYARD: Is there anything in particular that you would like to talk about in regard to Hope College or the Department of Physics?

KLEIS: I hardly know what to say! I get homesick for the place. I've been away from there for 13 years now, and one of the pleasures I enjoy is the rare times when I get back there. I was back at the Alumni Day proceedings on May 7, and at the 50 Year Circle there were three of us who had started together back in 1911 in the Prep School -- Peter Prins and Harold Veldman, Dr. Veldman from Grand Rapids, and myself -- and also two girls whom I had

taught more than 50 years ago in the Physics Department: Helen Van Ess and Pearle Leenhoute.

SWINYARD: Dr. Veldman was a missionary, wasn't he. I interviewed him last summer for the Hope College Old China Hands Oral History Project.

KLEIS: Yes, it seems to me that he did spend some time in China. I guess he's retired now, but he was at Butterworth Hospital for years.

SWINYARD: I've covered all the areas of questioning I was planning on, and much more quickly than I had expected. Do you have anything else to add?

KLEIS: I think you've covered the field pretty well.

SWINYARD: Thank you.

KLEIS: I called up the new man who's in the pastorate here now who's going to join the Religion Department with Dr. Bruins, Dr. Voskuil, and I told him I hoped his years there would be as happy as mine had been. I can say in all honesty that I never hated to go to school in the morning. It was just a pleasure as with the students as with fellow faculty members.

SWINYARD: Thank you very much, Mr. Kleis.

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Clarence Kleis

born: - -1898 in Holland, Michigan

parents names:

occupations:

*H. W. Kleis Jane Van Appeldoorn
farmer 1 sister all deceased
6 brothers*

brothers and sisters:

education: elementary: -
high school: Hope Preparatory
college: Hope
graduate: University of Michigan

diploma:
degree: A.B. 1919
degree: A.M. Physics 1928

married: Name:

date:

wife's hometown, occupation:

*Gladys Keonemeyer
June 16, 1921/4 April 6, 1900
Hamilton Mich, Teaching*

children: names and dates:

Dec 21, 1923
Nov 9, 1926

~~April 17, 1922~~

publications:

*Myra Kleis Berry
Paul m Kleis
Rev Carl m Kleis
June 11, 1932
May 7, 1934
Glennice Russeher
John - died in WWII 1945*

experience: teacher at: Hamilton High School 1919-1920
Saugatuck High School 1920-1921 (math and physics)
Hope Prep 1921-1923 (math)
Hope College 1923-1964 (physics)

also: 1936-1964 served on the Scholarship Committee
1945-1953 Chairman of Athletic Committee
1945-1964 served on the Administrative Committee

retired 1964

activities since 1964:

affiliations: