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Smith, Richard W (Mayor) Oral History Interview: Citizens of Holland

Phil Tanis

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HOPE COLLEGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Richard Smith
Interview
July 1985

Contents

Foreward
Legal Form
Introduction
Initial Interview
Edited Interview
Index

FOREWARD

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 involved in various parts of Holland's history, including that of Hope College. The persons interviewed represent a vital, but non-renewable resource, whose reflections will provide primary material for future historical research.

Upon completion of each interview session, the taped conversation was transcribed and edited by both the interviewer and interviewee. Some alterations concerning accuracy of detail and grammar may have come about during the editing process, but at all times the viewpoint of the interviewee has been maintained. Due to the fact that each of these interviews comes from a highly personal perspective, there may be some inaccuracies in detail. No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. The interval of time between the interviewee's experiences and the events mentioned can add to some inaccuracies. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives in Van Zoeren Library.

Without the advice of Dr. Elton Bruins, Dean of Humanities at Hope College and project coordinator, this project would not have succeeded to the extent it did. The success of this project must also be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees -- each has gone above and beyond the call of duty, putting in much time both in research and editing. I thank each and every one of them for their contribution to the history of Holland, in both this interview and what they have accomplished with their lives.

Phil Tanis, Summer 1985

INTRODUCTION

Holland has been blessed with many fine people who are devoted to giving their all for their community. Some of those people take the initiative themselves to run for a body such as the city council. And some are honored by being asked to run for the local legislative body.

Mr. Richard W. Smith was one so honored. After his becoming involved in the annexation of the Apple Avenue district to the Holland Public School district and the city of Holland, Mr. Smith's neighbors felt that he would do well to represent them on the governing board of their new city.

Mr. Smith submitted to their wishes and served two terms on the city council before taking a break from those important duties. He reentered Holland politics in the late seventies, this time as a mayoral candidate, when he was again approached by friends who felt he could lend his time and talents in that position.

Again, Mr. Smith accepted the challenge and served two terms as mayor of Holland. During his terms on council -- both as an alderman and as mayor -- Mr. Smith was thinking about the future of Holland. Three of the projects he was involved in which will make Holland a better place to live in years to come are the purchase of the Cappon House, the historic home of Holland's first mayor, the study and eventual purchase of the Tulip City Airport south of town, and the purchase of the Reimhold property, a large tract of land in a prime developing spot.

The Reimold property is probably Mr. Smith's crowning achievement. The property was bought with the sole purpose of preserving it for future generations' use. Yet even now it is beginning to be used in many ways --

with even more uses on the drawing board. Mr. Smith has left his community a great gift, one that will be remembered for years to come.

Name: Richard William Smith

Birthplace: Sioux Center, Iowa

Birthdate: July 3, 1923

Education

Elementary Schools: Maplewood, Van Raalte, Beechwood

Junior High School: Holland Junior High

Other: Various courses at Hope College and
General Electric

Professional Experiences

General Electric: buyer, purchasing, foreman, finance,
computer operator, etc.

Parental Information

Father: Richard Smith Sr.

Mother: Wilhelmina Van De Berg

Family Information

First wife: Harriet Redder

Married: May 8, 1947

Second Wife: Amy Kruithof Strabbing

Married: October 3, 1980

Divorced: June 1, 1982

Remarried: January 14, 1984

Children

William Craig, teacher in Grandville, Michigan

Rick Alan, director of Herman Miller operations in Dallas

Committees and assignments

Ex Officio Councilman, two terms on City Council, PTO,

First Airport Study Committee chairman, Planning Commission,

Michigan Municipal Mayors Conference, Windmill Island,

Apple Avenue Annexation Committee, Compensation Committee

Affiliations

Fish and Game Club

TPA of Holland (president)

Central Avenue Christian Reformed Consistory

Honors

Officer of the Orange Nassau

Present Activities

semi-retired

Interviewer: This is July 18, 1985. We are talking with Mr. Richard Smith. And you're just going to start from the beginning I guess.

Mr. Smith: O.K. Phil, we'll do the best we can here to kind of keep it as simple as possible. I'll go through all the things I have available, things that I have saved over the past years, and we'll try to -- start where we got started and that's in the school annexation part of my political life. Back in 1958, June of '58, the school district of Holland advised our school district -- I lived in the Apple Avenue school district -- that they no longer would accept our children to the Holland school system. So we got together as some neighbors and discussed the situation, and some of the people wanted to send their children to Saugatuck, and some of them wanted to send them to Holland, and some of them thought we could just build our own high school. And at that time we formed committees -- so I had at that time I had two boys at Apple Avenue school, and we were very active in the school itself. Apple Avenue school district was not a very large district, but it was a very rich district. And it was about a mile square. But I personally felt that the school district of Holland was correct in their assumptions that the territorial area of Holland -- or of Apple Avenue school district -- should be within the city of Holland. Its local was such that I think it kind of fit right in. So I got some of the neighbors together in my basement, and we discussed the situation, and we had an election of people that we thought could look at all the angles and study the issues. And so we did this and got together and formed various committees. And we did make a -- and our committees made a recommendation to our school board that we annex to the city of Holland. And that was approved, and we went to work on it. And eventually, after some time and effort, we did annex to the city of Holland

and we did this -- I think the date of the latest newspaper at that time was on June 4 of 1958 which we have a picture on the front of that paper of the members of our committee. But I guess the secret to our success was that we had enough people in the district working on the committee to annex that it wasn't really much of a struggle once we got these people convinced that our children should join the children of the city of Holland in their school district. And then after that we annexed politically which was a request by the city of Holland that we come into the city politically. And after that we were asked -- the mayor of the city of Holland who at that time was Robert Visscher -- he asked our school district and our area to nominate a person that could sit in on city council as an ex officio member, and I was chosen by our district to do this and which I was very happy to do. And so at that time I had gone through a whole new experience in life. And it was not easy. There was a lot of hard feelings through annexation. But I think looking back at it, we did the right thing. And I think everybody seems to be quite happy at this time; that our Apple Avenue school district was the first one to see that this was the way we should progress in our area and our community and so it was not done for nothing. And so from that point on we did sit in on all council meetings.

And later on we did have the opportunity to -- the citizens of our area, Bob Kowe, Robert Kowe at that time was our council man, and he did not choose to seek reelection. So the people of our area -- of the Apple Avenue area -- asked me if I would run for council. And after much consideration I said, "Well, O.K. I'll try it." And so we did, and we were successful and after the ex officio run out, I did serve eight years on the city council.

As the time went by and as I got involved more and more in the city

government, I served under Mr. Nels Bosman as mayor and Bob Visscher as mayor and two super fine nice gentlemen who had certainly always kept the city of Holland uppermost in their mind. And they asked me to sit on council, of course, bringing as much information to them about our area as possible. But as time went on I had the privilege of serving on the planning commission, and I had the opportunity to serve as chairman of the first airport study committee which was organized back in July 28 of 1964. Councilman, not councilman, Mayor, I think it was Mayor Bosman at that time appointed councilmen Steffens and Van Eirden and myself to a special airport study committee. And they asked me if I would be chairman -- which we did. And we made a long, extensive study of airport needs in our community and locations. And our findings were presented to council some time later, and our recommendation was that the site officially selected by our committee and approved by the state was the site of the Tulip City Airport. And this recommendation was approved by council, and from that point on we made various steps for salt borings and so on and so forth -- all the requirements that are set forth by the state and the United States government. And so from that time on, so about twenty years ago, twenty-some years ago, that airport has been under study, and it looks like now as if it might become a reality. Which was a very interesting committee to serve on.

We served on -- I'd like to just elaborate a little bit more on the -- my experience and my opportunity to serve on the planning commission at that time. We had a Suigest report, we had a Fantis report which was very helpful to try to give us some insight on what direction our community should be going; one-way streets and truck routes and things of this nature. At that time we got involved in the purchasing and retaining of the windmill and

bringing that to Holland, which was a real experience. And we also got involved in some mayor exchanges. We had the opportunity to go to Untica, Michigan with Mayor Bosman and his wife, my wife and I; which really serves as an important tool to help serve the community. You get different ideas, you see different people, you get new ideas on different subjects on what other communities are doing. And at that time we -- one of the things I got involved in -- I made a recommendation to council that we study the possibility of building an outdoor swimming pool for our community. And that was a very worthwhile experience. We proposed that we build an outdoor swimming pool in Prospect Park woods and -- but at that time it was defeated by not too much a margin. But I did think it kind of set the tone for Holland to have a community pool which we eventually did build an indoor pool which I wanted really in the first place but sometimes you take a little bit at a time. But this would have been a nice park to have a pool, but the people of Holland saw fit not to, but then later on we now have our community pool which I'm very proud of.

Part of the committees -- or some of the committees that I served on on my second term as councilman was on the compensation commission, the board of appeals, and also had the wonderful experience of welcoming Queen Beatrix to our community. And we also had the privilege of being instrumental in obtaining the first electronic scoreboard for our ball teams in Holland which is now located at the Maplewood ball park and getting various people in town to contribute towards this project -- was very worthwhile.

After I completed my second term as councilman, I did seek reelection for a third term and I was defeated by Jack Smith, a neighbor of mine, and Jack did a very nice job and he was a good guy, he did a good job for the community.

But then I kind of got out of politics for a few years and paid more attention to my family, and at that time my wife passed away and then my boys were both married and I was alone. And the same neighbors that saw fit to run me for councilman asked if I would be willing to consider to run for mayor. And after much consideration and prayer I discussed it with my employer and they agreed that it would be O.K. if I wanted, if I decided to do that, and again consulting with my two boys and my friends and we decided that we would do that and if we were elected we would do the best we could and if we weren't elected, that would be the peoples' choice.

But we were elected, and the primaries were held on the seventh of August and the general election on November 6 of 1979. And we were elected, and some of the things that happened during that time we'll try to review which was a big undertaking for me, never being in politics before. But I guess you do, you listen a lot and you try to be helpful and things of this nature.

I don't know Phil, some of the things I wasn't used to is public speaking but it seems, though, the more you do that, the easier it gets, and the more involved and the more knowledgable I became of various things, it was rather quite easy for me to do that. Of course I wasn't as fluent a speaker as Guy Vander Jagt but my name isn't Vander Jagt either. So we got involved in downtown parking, I guess was one of the first things we got involved in. And that was rather interesting, try to improve our downtown area which I think is much in need of this; parking and new stores and so on and so forth. And as things progressed we got involved in various projects within the community. We had the Ox Roast, of course, which we have every year in conjunction with Hope College and the first football team. And we got involved in one of the sticky things, we got involved with a tax freeze. We had a petition some

people were circulating to freeze their taxes and which required a tremendous amount of time of speaking to various people all over the community. And the city manager, myself, we took it upon ourselves that we didn't think this was the best for the community so we worked hard at it and were successful in defeating it.

At the present time I'm going through my scrap book and looking at all the nice cards and some of the nice things about being mayor, and one thing about Holland the people of Holland, they don't forget you and they're very appreciative of what you do for the community.

As time went on and when you become the mayor of the community you're no longer a follower, people look to you for leadership and one of the first things that happened while I was mayor, we got involved in the -- our country got involved in the Iranian situation with the hostages and at that time I saw fit to call our community together and have an hour of prayer which they responded to very well. And I asked Dr. John Francis of the United Methodist Church and Reverend Terry Lapinsky of the Providence Christian Reformed Church to work with me. And we had a prayer service -- a community prayer service -- in Hope College Dimment Chapel which was very impressive and was well supported by the community. And which makes you feel good that when you try to do these sort of things that the community goes along with it and they appreciate these sort of things.

And then we got involved in a Lake Macatawa study; we're trying to straighten out the channel. And at this point nothing has been done yet but it's a tremendously costly project.

And from there we go on into the mayorial coffees which we have at Christmas time in city hall. And there's just many many things that happen when you're

mayor, and a lot people expect you to be doing all these welcomings of various things in the community which is great. I think we have a great community. And you meet a lot of nice people, a lot of nice dignataries. For instance, our Lieutenant Governor Jim Brickley comes to town and you have to meet people like that. And we have little boys that have champions, like Matt Stegenga, winner of the national Ford Press Punt and Kick Competition and we were involved in that. And also had the priviledge of working with our present mayor, Mayor Bill Sikkel, he took a trip to Washinton and presented Mrs. General Douglas MacArthur with a pair of wooden shoes. And all these memories I'm very fond of, and you'd be surprised that the people that you work with that they're all trying to work with you and do what's good for our community.

I got involved very much with the schools, young people. I like kids. And you get invitations to all areas of the community: service clubs, you're asked to speak at service clubs which I welcome. And you get an opportunity to visit our representatives and our senators in Washington and also on the state level. And it's a very interesting office to hold, it's a very busy one, but it's very neat. We also have -- our committee -- has been involved in trees, Arbor Day, trees, and we have been given awards on that. And planting trees and flags and what have you. And then also you get involved in mayor's exchanges. We had the opportunity to go to Dearborn, Michigan and visit with Mayor John O'Reilly and his wife. Very super nice people. Another one of our memories in when Ronald Reagan and George Bush were running for office, that we had the opportunity to welcome them to our community. Had the opportunity to speak with them, Ronald Reagan, and present Nancy Reagan with a pair of wooden shoes and some -- a boquet of tulips.

And then we got involved in various controversial things in the community. One of them I remember is the council had to vote on the Sunday hours for Bouws Pool, and sometimes I think we put more emphasis on this than what we should, but I say that just because I believe that maybe we shouldn't do it on a Sunday at that time, that doesn't mean that I should be eliminating other people from doing this. But now that we have opened the pool on Sunday it has really worked out really well, and has not been misused, and the kids, the people, are really enjoying it, and so I'm very glad that it has gone that direction.

We get the opportunity again to go down to Windmill Island and visit with school children down there. And then of course, on Memorial Day, we always have a parade and the mayor is the chairman of that committee and he must obtain speakers each year which is a very interesting parade. I just have a soft spot in my heart for flags, our American flag. It seems like even if I talk about them or if a parade goes by and flags go by I just -- gives me a big lump in my throat. I'm just so happy to be an American and I'm just so happy to be able to serve in our community, and do whatever I can for our country and for our children, and whatever it takes.

Other things that we had the honor and privilege of witnessing was our recreational director in our community was a real hero. And he got his final dues when he was presented the medal of honor in Washington, D.C. which I was -- had an invitation -- and which I did attend. And which was just a super ceremony, Matt (Urban) being presented this medal of honor in Washington by our president, Jimmy Carter.

And then we get the opportunity of one time to even direct the American Legion band at their sixtieth anniversary in Kollens Park. Which I think the

American Legion band is just a -- does a real fine job for our community, and they're always willing to cooperate when asked to participate in all events that come around Holland.

And then you meet from time to time, Dutch heroes and Dutch v.i.p. people that come here from the Netherlands and they seem to have a soft spot in their heart for Holland, Michigan.

One of the projects which initiated while I was in office and that I am still proud of is Project Pride. Project Pride is a program which we try to clean up our entire community. We give the people an opportunity to get rid of all their junk, so to speak that they have stored in the garages, and old refridgerators and old stoves and we have volunteers go around and pick this up. We got this idea in Dearborn when we had mayor exchange in Dearborn and they had something similar to this. But when Councilman Tysse and I got back -- and on the way back -- we discussed that well, why can't Holland get something started. So I presented it to council and it went off -- took off very favorable and we still are doing it and which we call Project Pride.

And then you have opportunities to get in, of course, all new stores that are opening, and banks that open and things of this nature. One of the things that I did try to get started, I'm a firm believer that people like to do things, they like to have the opportunity to contribute. And at that time we were short of money within our city coffers and rather than always going to the city and asking for contributions, I said why don't we try to promote something where we can make money to put in and support some of our committees and projects that are presently trying to keep their head above water. So I organized a Mayor's Day back in 1980 and come up with a committee that had senior citizens playing shuffle board. We had a golf tournament. We had

various things of that nature. And it was -- we had a hotdog roast. I think it was at Smallemberg Park. And we presented the -- our proceeds were about, I think around \$3,000 -- and we had the opportunity to present the American Legion band with a check for \$600 which was of proceeds from that particular project. And that's very -- that's a lot of fun. We played ball and we did a lot of things. And it just gives the people of the community an opportunity to get involved and be part of something.

I can remember back in 1960, April 27 of 1960, I had the opportunity to have coffee with Ronald Reagan, our president, and that was still when I was working at General Electric Company. And he's a sharp guy. He was a film star at that time, and now he's our president, and I think he's doing a fine job and I just hope that the Lord spares him in a few more years that he can be our leader in our nation, because he's done a fine job.

There's different things that come about in the council meetings. We'll have budget studies. We -- at one time we tried very hard to get an elevator in city hall which we think that we need down there, but it's very costly and as of right now city council has not yet seen fit to proceed on that project.

And every Christmas I saw fit -- I tried to have a Christmas message for the community and meet with various school children of our community. And I think this is a very special season for all of us.

One of the things we got involved in, very much, was the rezoning of a parcel of land on Waverly and Thirty-second Street for a mall. There was much feeling in the community for and against this mall. And it was rezoned. The mall never was built, and I'm assuming right now that it probably never will be built on that particular piece of land. But although I think that one of

these days Holland will experience a mall within this close area.

We had a few calamities within the community. When I first took office, we had the roof of the fire station on Waverly Road collapsed. We had another bad thing happen to us. The stadium -- the playing field of the stadium -- was not done properly, according to specifications. We ended up taking both of the architects, the contractors, to court on these two projects. And we did win out and got some of our money back.

From time to time, our city manager and myself, we got involved in tax discussions in the community. I felt very strong that I think the best way to have the people vote for a project that you're promoting is to make sure that they're informed. And we would -- the city manager, Terry Hofmeyer, and myself -- would make sure that we would take time out and have public meetings and inform the people, at least give them the opportunity.

One of my memories was that when Terry Hofmeyer and myself, we would get invited to Washington, D.C. each spring. And we would have an opportunity to meet with a lot of mayors of the same size city as Holland. And we had a special invitation to the ambassador of the Netherlands. Mr. Lubbers and his wife invited us to come over for lunch. And we went to their residency in Washington, D.C. and we had lunch with them one day. And we just had an excellent, excellent time. And the following year we went to the embassy, the Netherlands embassy and that's really an experience that I'll never forget. And just very nice people. Dr. Lubbers is now retired, but I have an open invitation to go to the Netherlands and visit them any time I happen to get there.

Other parts of my mayorial ideas was to begin our local county officials involved in our community. I strived very diligently to get our elected

officials of Ottawa County to meet with us at council meetings, our study session of council meetings. I also had Allegan County people involved, and I think we created a good understanding of one another's problems and how we could best work together on taxes and things of this nature and not duplicating of services in any way which is very, very expensive.

And of course on Tulip Time, the governors always come to Holland, and they're your guests. I can remember Governor Milliken and Governor Blanchard, very nice fellows, and their wives which we would entertain them. Even though Governor Blanchard is a Democrat and Holland and Allegan county is basically Republican, I am proud of our people the way they received him and entertained him and recognized that really is our governor.

And then again there is more mayorial visits. At Tulip Time we always invite the mayor from another community to join us and participate in the events and then right after Tulip Time we usually get an invitation to their city and -- which we usually accept.

O.K. then in '81 we decided to run for second term as mayor, and we were successful and I'd just like to have recorded some of the outstanding events that we did in our second term. Again, I'd like to say that I do like to meet with children and with schools and so on. And one of the things I got started in my second term, I got council to approve a suggestion award program for our city employees. I think it's very important that we tap our city employees for all the suggestions, help, and their knowledge that they have in trying to serve our community in the jobs that they hold. I just feel that the snowplow driver must have some suggestions on how to do the job better. There's always a better way. And there's got to be money saved. And it's easier for us to ask the employees to help us and which we did organize a suggestion award

program and there was many suggestions turned in and many awards granted. And I hope that the council continues to do this because there's a lot of money out there that can be saved just by the employees turning in suggestions.

One of the highlights, I guess, of my second term as mayor is we had the opportunity to entertain Queen Beatrix and Prince Claus with their visit to the United States of which they included Holland in that visit. It was a real experience. It was time consuming and a lot of people got involved but I think the whole thing went off just super and our community really appreciated her visit to us. And we also had the opportunity to go to Washington, D.C. to meet her just before she arrived in Holland. And it was a trip that I'll never forget.

One of the things that I'm very appreciative of is that Queen Beatrix on her visit to the United States honored me with an Officer of the Orange Nassau. The insignia consists of a cross with eight beaded points, and a continuous laurel wreath between the arms and capped by a royal crown, all made of gold. And I very much appreciate this. The honor was bestowed and given to -- these medals are given to people who she feels go over and beyond the call of duty and to which she visits a country that try to make her visit a worthwhile one. And of course I didn't know anything of this until she arrived in this country, and I was really surprise, but I appreciate it very, very much.

And as I said before, we get involved in a lot of visitors to our community such as Dutch choirs, and things of this nature. One thing that did happen in our community while I was mayor is that we had a -- well I would say they call it a 50 year flood. And we had a tremendous amount of damage in our community. But our people all banded together and our churches all banded together to help those who were injured and who experienced the most loss of

property, and tried to supply them with whatever damaged equipment they had done to their homes. And Holland and the people of Holland can be very proud of one another in doing this sort of thing.

Then of course we mustn't forget Tulip Time. We always get involved in Tulip Time every year which is a very, very busy time for the mayor.

We did get involved in -- to get back to our airport, which I happened to be chairman of the first airport study committee twenty-some years ago. And we had -- still think we should have an airport for our community to serve our industry and basically it's not a commercial airport but one that would take care of the needs of our industry and of course we had some people, they submitted petitions that no tax payers money would be used to support this airport. And our industry saw fit that they would contribute that portion of money to the airport and which they did and we are now in the process of obtaining funds from the state and from our federal government and building an airport for Holland to serve as the needs of our community. Hopefully within a few years that will be completed.

Some more of the dignitaries which we had the opportunity to meet was former president Gerald Ford. The mayor of Trenton, Michigan was our guest at mayor exchange. The mayor of Monroe, Michigan was here. And it's memories such as that that make all the work of being mayor worthwhile.

And included in that list is Mark Siljander. And another experience we had was Mr. Turkey. The Bilmar Turkey Farm they had the world's longest hotdog celebration in our community. And it's things like that you get involved in that really are memorable.

O.K. Then another project which is really near and dear to me is the Reimold property. I think the Reimold property which is a hundred and sixty acre

tract of land which is located on east Sixteenth Street and Country Club Road and the old hundred and sixteen year old farm house built by Albertus Van Raalte's son, was for sale and I just thought it would just be gorgeous if our community could purchase that for future generations to do whatever they saw fit. My recommendation to council was that we buy it with no strings attached, that whatever the future generation wants to do with it they would have no strings attached to it at that time at all. So we were successful in getting enough support on council to buy the Reimold property and we had the opportunity to obtain all the antiques that were in the old farmhouse, that would become part of our museum some day.

And along with purchasing the Reimold property I had the opportunity to deal with the United States government. And they decided to build a new post office in our community. And my recommendation at that time was that we build it on east Eighth Street which would make a good anchor store or serve as a good anchor store on that end of town. And that we be allowed to have the first chance on obtaining the old post office in our community to be used as a museum. And that is still in the making, hopefully. I just think that some day that the old post office would make an ideal museum for our community in which things which we obtain in the Reimold property could be put into that building which is much better suited for a museum than our present one.

And I think at this point, I have gone through most of my memories. I have come to the end of the second term of my mayorial duties, and of which I want to say I have enjoyed very much and that some of the things that I have done, I am glad that I was in a position that I could present them to our fine city of Holland, Michigan, and that our children and our children's children years to come will enjoy the things which we promoted and things which we had a

chance to voice our opinion and our suggestions in. Thank you very much for this opportunity, and this is Richard W. Smith of 648 Columbia Avenue now signing off.

INDEX

American Legion Band

.....8,9,10

Apple Avenue School (district)

.....1,2

Bilmar Turkey Farm

.....14

Blanchard, James

.....12

Bosman, Nelson

.....3,4

Bouws Pool

.....8

Brickley, James

.....7

Bush, George

.....7

Carter, Jimmy

.....8

Dearborn, Michigan

.....7,9

Dimment Chapel

.....6

Fantis Report

.....3

Ford, Gerald

.....14

Ford Press Punt and Kick Competition

.....7

Francis, Dr. John

.....6

General Electric Company

.....10

Hofmeyer, Terry

.....11

Holland Public School (system)

.....1,2

Hope College

.....5,6

Kollen Park

.....8

Kowe, Robert

.....2

Lake Macatawa

.....6

Lapinsky, Reverend Terry

.....6

Lubbers, Ambassador

.....11

MacArthur, Mrs. General Douglas

.....7

Mayor's Day

.....9

Milliken, William

.....12

Monroe, Michigan

.....14

O'Reilly, John

.....7

Ottawa County

.....12

Ox Roast

.....5

Prince Claus

.....13

Project Pride

.....9

Prospect Park

.....4

Providence Christian Reformed Church

.....6

Queen Beatrix

.....4,13

Reagan, Ronald (and Nancy)

.....7,10

Reimold Property

.....14,15

Saugatuck

.....1

Sikkel, William

.....7

Siljander, Mark

.....14

Smallenberg Park

.....10

Smith, Jack

.....4

Steffans, Councilman

.....3

Stegenga, Matt

.....7

Suigest Report

.....3

Trenton, Michigan

.....14

Tulip City Airport

.....3,14

Tulip Time

.....12,14

Tysse, John

.....9

United Methodist Church

.....6

Untinca, Michigan

.....4

Urban, Matt

.....8

Vander Jagt, Guy

.....5

Van Eirden, Councilman

.....3

Van Raalte, Albertus

.....15

Visscher, Robert

.....2,3

Washington, D.C.

.....7,8,11,13

Windmill Island

.....8