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Lamb, Lawrence William "Bill", Jr. Oral History Interview: Former Mayors of Holland

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INTRODUCTION

During work on this project, I was asked many times what I thought of Bill Lamb. Before I could answer, whoever had asked me the question would exclaim that he thought Mr. Lamb was one of the best mayors Holland has ever had. I'd have to agree with that. Mr. Lamb decided to run for council to help people. Throughout his tenure on council, as either a councilman or as mayor, he kept his goal in mind. He wanted to bring the community together, both the city and townships and peoples of different religions and races. While he was concerned with the workings of the city and accomplished many major building projects, he always put people on top. In his mind, probably, and surely in mine, the major accomplishment of his tenure was not the building of the new police station but the area-wide study of where the Holland community was going. It is this that should stand as a tribute to this fine individual who set a Holland on a straight course for many years.

Name: Lawrence William Lamb, Jr.

Birthplace: South Haven, Mi

Date: [date removed], 1924

Education:

Elementary and Junior High: Jackson, Ganges, Lakeview

High School: Holland High School

College: University of Michigan, University of North Dakota, University of Barittz, Hope College

Professional Experiences: highway construction, wholesale and retail auto parts

Father's Name and Occupation: Lawrence William Lamb, Sr.; civil engineer highway construction

Mother's Name: Hazel Decker Lamb

Spouce's Name: Elsie Elizabeth Parsons Lamb

Date of Marriage: June 30, 1948

Childrens' Names and Present Occupations: Lawernce William Lamb III, auto parts dealer; J. Rossman Lamb, Manpower; Frederick Charles Lamb, auto parts dealer

Committees and Assignments: Consistory (Deacon and Elder), Building Commission for Church, President of Michigan Road Builders Association, Maplewood School Board, City Council, Planning Commission, Firestation Building Committee, Mayor

Affiliations: Michigan Road Builders Association

Honors: Distinguished Community Service Award

Present Activities: President of Lamb, Inc.

Interview with Mr. Bill Lamb

Interviewer: When were you elected to council?

Mr. Lamb: The spring of 1967 I was elected to one four year term.

Interviewer: And you ran for mayor in?

Mr. Lamb: In 1971.

Interviewer: And why did you run for mayor?

Mr. Lamb: Well for both offices I think I ran because of the influence of others primarily our minister who said we should get out of our pews and into our community. Basically this was the predominate reason for my running.

Interviewer: You served for one term?

Mr. Lamb: One term. As it happened it was an odd term because we went from a spring election to a fall election for our city council people and consequently I had a mayorial term of about two and a half years instead of the standard two year term.

Interviewer: Why was the election time changed?

Mr. Lamb: It became a state law that public entities could change election times. Ours was a spring time special election and that usually was the only item on the ballot unless there was a millage for the schools. So from a financial point of view it was better for us to change and go with a November election like the federal and state elections.

Interviewer: Could you outline the steps to the construction of the new Police Department building on Eighth Street?

Mr. Lamb: That evolved like a lot of other things in this world. Basically the city manager and council had been working on a new city hall complex which included a fire station and police station. This was to be in the same block that the city hall is in now, and it was going to take the whole block. After we got into it, the cost, public input, we decided that this was much too much a grandiose idea especially with the fact that our present city hall was structurally sound. So we turned our thoughts to just the police station where it eventually evolved to. We appointed a committee, and the committee came up with the present sight. Another sight was south across the street from the Civic Center. When we got down to the final vote we decided to take down the then existing police station and build a new police station there. We worked with the county to put in a court building as well.

Interviewer: Where was the old police station?

Mr. Lamb: Roughly right where the county court building part of the complex is now. The present police station is actually where the old fire station was. These two were in one building; fire station on the west side, police station in the east part of the building.

Interviewer: Why were there so many public improvement projects?

Mr. Lamb: World War II was part of this problem. Not much construction was done during the war years or right afterwards. Plus the the growth of the community after the war and the advent of HEDCOR to the south and east side of the railroad tracks necessitated some of these changes. We wanted to have a fire station on

the other side of the tracks because then trains were much more numerous and a fire truck could be held up, consequently a long fire could ruin a company. The first thing we did was to build a fire station on East Thirty-Second Street and Waverly Road to take care of HEDCOR and the homes on that side of town. At that time the police station was very small. When people had to be interviewed they went into the chief's office because there was no place else. As I recall there was only a large ante-room, the chief's office, and the jail itself. With the growth of our area these buildings had to be replaced.

Interviewer: Were there any annexations or attempts at annexations during your term?

Mr. Lamb: Minor ones. The annexation problem had taken place primarily in the Fifties and early Sixties. There was spot annexation due to a corporation being contiguous to the city, and it wanted to come in for the benefit of the utilities. But no whole neighborhoods were annexed at that time. We had gone through that problem, and it left bad feelings between the townships and the city as well as with the outside school boards.

Interviewer: What was the impact of the new computer that the city got in the late sixties?

Mr. Lamb: Like all computers it's traumatic for all who have to work with them and get them on line, but I'm sure it has saved labor since the computer has been on line. At the beginning there was no labor saving. It usually takes more labor and time to get all the information in and going. You don't lose any people, but you don't have to add people as you go.

Interviewer: So the city got it as a saver for the future?

Mr. Lamb: For the future and for growth, and to be more efficient, too. I think it's a great savings in the area of updating and keeping things up in the city assessor's office for instance. I just know that it has helped in many of these areas.

Interviewer: What downtown improvements were planned, tried, or implemented?

Mr. Lamb: We did try for a whole mall where you would close off the main street just as Kalamazoo had done, but in our deliberations, and involvement with the community and the merchants what evolved I really think it better. We do have movement through our center town. We did evolve into what I would call "half a mall" with the beautification and the parking. At the same time we did institute a one-way street system all of which was difficult. It was change, and some citizens had problems acclimating themselves to this even to the point that we were taken to court, and we had a referendum vote. The one-way street system and the mall are viable and I know they're one of the main reasons for the success of downtown. Can you imagine what Eighth Street would be like if all the trucks from Seventh and Ninth Streets were on it? Those were at one time going up and down Eighth Street. It was really a mess. This change was a step in the right direction and has been good for the community.

Interviewer: Was there any growth, new businesses coming in, after the new downtown mall was put in?

Mr. Lamb: Prior to the time of the new mall, the city's appraisal of the property values were dropping, and we had empty stores. There was not the optimism on

Eighth Street, and as I say, the value of the properties were going down. After we put the mall in, the buildings did fill up and the appraisals values reversed. Thus the city benefitted by having a full downtown plus the fact that the buildings were worth more. They were more salable and at better prices.

Interviewer: What was the Youth Commission?

Mr. Lamb: Back in the sixties, during the Viet Nam era, society and the youth especially were very much in turmoil. The youth were congregating in large groups and causing disturbances. The Civic parking lot became a place where all the young people came together. There was friction between the three different high schools. To try to alleviate this, we formed a 14 member Youth Commission asking for volunteers from all three high schools to involve them in something positive or something they could do together. I remember that one of the first times we worked with the JayCees and had a rock band at Riverview Park which was put on jointly between the youth and the JayCees, and it worked out well. That went on for a couple of years. We also had seminars in the fall where we would try and get the young people to work together, get their schools to have vocational seminars where individuals from the outside business world and the professional world came, and the youth would come and talk to these people. It was something to get them on the positive track instead of going to hang-outs and creating problems or raiding each others' schools and creating disturbances.

Interviewer: So there were real major problems...

Mr. Lamb: Yes, yes there were. I remember we had discussions with the youth. One of the things I remember they wanted was a race track so they could go out and

race their cars. That was quite a huge financial undertaking and it never evolved. But it did give them expression for their frustrations and their wants and needs, and we did sit down and talk together which is a start in helping to solve a problem. You may not get what you want, but things evolved out of it, and I think it was a positive step.

Interviewer: When and why was it dissolved?

Mr. Lamb: That happened after I left council, and I am not aware why. I think it's hard because you don't have a continuity of people. We're talking about people from 16 to 22, and some move on to college, some move out of town and take jobs. These were primarily high school students, senior highs; learning young people as we were in this area. There wasn't much money for them, and it was a matter of them initiating some of these programs themselves and working together, and if you don't have good leadership, it can fall flat like any organization.

Interviewer: Could you explain the swimming pool issue and what became of that?

Mr. Lamb: It was not an issue. The city was given a gift of \$60,000. At that time it was anonymous. We were told it was for a swimming pool. Well, \$60,000 is a wonderful start, and it was very gracious. If there was any issue it was that we were adding an expense and we had to come up with more money to build the pool. Many times philanthropists will give gifts, but usually that's just the beginning of the costs, and the city has an ongoing expense that the taxpayers have to cover.

Interviewer: The pools presently are under the school system now, or...

Mr. Lamb: No. The pool on Maple was voted in by the city. It was instituted by the

public school system. It is maintained by a millage that is voted on. The pool near Fairbanks and Sixteenth Street is the pool that had a contribution of \$60,000. It's under the city council.

Interviewer: What happened with the Cable Antenna Television?

Mr. Lamb: A number of companies came to city hall and wanted to use the BPW's poles to string their lines on, and then run their lines into the house. We were told at that time that this was the forerunner of lots of things that could happen whereby homes maybe could even be checked for fire with this type of system. One could read meters so it became a natural that the BPW would approve. There was a committee appointed to talk to the different cable television companies, and, as I recall, this boiled down to two or three cable companies. We became aware that they wanted to fly this committee to California to check this or that, and this to us was kind of a bribe. We felt that they were trying to put pressure on us. The council informed the committee that if any of these companies approached any of us individually or the committee other than the information we asked for they would immediately be dropped. This stopped all pressure, and from that point on the committee evaluated what they felt would be best for the city. That was in the early seventies, but I don't recall cable coming into town until later.

They had to string the wires and lines, and they had to build their station and bring in their equipment. I don't recall whether they were under a time limit or not.

Interviewer: What type of public transportation system did Holland have before Dial-a-Ride?

Mr. Lamb: We had taxis and inner city busses, all which were privately owned and operated. They both went out because of increasing costs and the lack of volume. The taxi went out first. Later the council subsidized the buses for a summer to see what could be done. It just did not get the ridership. We were losing money so we closed it up.

Interviewer: Why did the city go with Dial-a-Ride?

Mr. Lamb: Like many things from government, the bulk of the cost was ^{paid} ~~payed~~ for by a higher government. We were paying for it in our taxes so we link it - that's the reason we went with it.

Interviewer: What events took place celebrating Holland's 125th anniversary?

Mr. Lamb: I think there were three major events which were spaced throughout the year. One of the first was in February of 1972 we had a church service at the Pillar Church on Ninth Street. Then in September we had the Queen of the Netherland's daughter here for an all day affair. She was coming to the United States so we worked the date around her. We had an outing with her where she ^{rode} ~~read~~ through the city, we showed her the city and the city hall, she participated in a dedication at Hope College. Then she flew out late that afternoon. We had dinner at noon with her and her husband at the Yacht Club. It seems to me that there were one or two other events, but I have since forgotten these.

Interviewer: Who organized these? Was there a special committee?

Mr. Lamb: Everything we had and did was usually done by a committee appointed by the mayor with council's approval. I'm sure that Bill Wichers was chairman of this

committee. He had the contact with the Netherlands. There were many others on his committee. We always tried to involve people outside council but then there would be a member or two of council also as liason back to the council.

Interviewer: When did you request your "Goals of Holland" report be made?

Mr. Lamb: We appointed the committee in early 1972. I had served on council four years and mayor probably one when we appointed the goals committee. I had always felt, and still do, that governments react. They don't act. They react to problems that come up and they spend too much time running around putting out fires. They're buffeted like a river from one side of the stream to the other depending upon how hard the bank is or how hard the flow is. There's hardly any time free for councilmembers in State government or Federal government, to sit down and say, "Where do we want to be next year, or five years, or ten years from now?" You're always under too much pressure to do the things that the law requires or that many of your constituents require of you that your time is filled. We felt that it would be good if we would have long range goals that we could have the community as a whole look at. Now this was not a city, per se, project. This was area wide. We had people from the surrounding townships that were contiguous with us appointed to this committee. Then these people broke down into smaller groups and took different sections and came up with long range goals for our community.

Interviewer: Could you touch briefly on some of the topics covered?

Mr. Lamb: We had a number of areas: the Cooperation of Elected Governing Bodies; Area Land Use and Planning; Environment; Culture, Recreation, Entertainment and

Sports; and last Health, Education, and Welfare.

Interviewer: There were quite a few people working on this. How did you tap into them? Did you know most of them?

Mr. Lamb: Yes, I knew most of them, or if I didn't know somebody from a township, I'd get ahold of the township supervisor and ask him who would be good to be on it. I asked Ab Martin, who is now deceased; the retired General Manager of General Electric to be the General Chairman. From that point on these people then put themselves into the different groups. We involved people from different religions of the community, different minorities of the community, and also from different political entities. So this, we felt, was a great cross section of our community.

Interviewer: Do you know how long it took these committees to get their reports together? Was it done by the time you left office?

Mr. Lamb: Oh, yes. I'd say maybe a year.

Interviewer: Do you feel that the trends, or some of the trends, in that booklet are happening?

Mr. Lamb: I don't think it's referred to or used enough. Tell me have any councilmembers used it or referred to it?

Interviewer: I doubt if many have.

Mr. Lamb: That's the problem. It's in city hall. It's in the library. To me, this should be given to every new councilmember. It can be a good guide. It has been used in court. It is viable, and it is what the people of that time felt they wanted.

It is certainly better than nothing and a beginning.

Interviewer: So since council members aren't really looking at it any more do you feel that the goals are being accomplished?

Mr. Lamb: Yes, some of them are, especially land use. Political entities are great but they have lines. Thus the problem with the proposed mall. I would have liked to see City Hall and all the surrounding townships get together and say, "Hey, where is the best place for the 'public' to have for this mall?" But instead each unit wants it because they think they're going to gain some taxes. I think the goals could have been some help and a reference to those who were debating this problem. The environment: what good's it going to do the city of Holland to have scrubbers in on the BPW's Power Plant, when Consumer's Power isn't going to do it? You know, their dirty smoke floats over us, and our clean smoke floats over them. Many of our problems are area wide but we live in political entities. This is one of our major problems, and the "Goals" spoke to this problem, too.

Interviewer: What were the council meetings like?

Mr. Lamb: Long. We had a great council. I look back on that time as one of the greatest experiences I've ever had. There was a change in council from the type and thinking prior to our coming on. We as a group were a little younger, four of us went on council in 1967. Our sole goal was to make things better for the community. There was no haggling between council members. Anyone of us felt that we could say anything anytime and as stupid as some things were another councilmember wouldn't make light of it and would be considerate of each other. This carried on during my term as mayor. It was just a great time. We instituted

council study sessions. When we went on council the newspaper was not allowed at the dinner meeting we had prior to council meetings. One of the first things we did was to invite the newspapers to come and have dinner with us and listen to our discussion. This was over the objections of a couple of the older councilmembers who had kept them out. But we felt we had nothing to hide. The public had a right to know. If I have a set of facts and I come to a conclusion, and I give you these same set of facts hopefully they would come to this same conclusion. When the public doesn't know the facts, how are they going to come to the same conclusion? They're going to be against you rather than with you. So that opened up a new era for the newspaper. We had good coverage. They sat in; they didn't ask questions; they were observers. I think it's tougher today. I think the newspaper is much more critical; they're 20/20 hindsight. But in that day they reported what we did. It worked out fine and consequently we didn't worry about the newspaper. We didn't have television; we weren't televised. But they were just a great group of people who were dedicated to doing the very best each of us could for the community. It was a nice experience for me.

Interviewer: Would you like to comment on any of the councilmembers individually?

Mr. Lamb: Only as I say, I felt that we all respected each other. We did not agree, but we respected each other and a guy could still vote "No" and it didn't bother anybody at the end of the meeting or the discussion because you're not going to get nine people to agree on everything every time and that was fine. Nobody tried to climb up somebody else's back or get something in the newspaper to make one look better than the other. It was the nicest group that I have ever worked with.

Interviewer: You met on Wednesdays most often?

Mr. Lamb: Yes. We had study sessions on the Wednesdays we did not have council meetings.

Interviewer: Did you call many special sessions?

Mr. Lamb: No, those were only special needs, if something had to be done, or a contract had to be signed. There were very few special sessions called. We had the study sessions and then in the fall we always had a special day or two study session.

Interviewer: For the budget did you have any long...

Mr. Lamb: Oh, yes, every evening for a week. When we went on council, in 1967, we did not see an agenda until we walked in for supper prior to the meeting. We asked the city manager about getting the agenda the week before, and he said he couldn't get it. And we said, "Yes you can." Because, you know, to walk in that late and not be able to have thought problem over a little bit was ludicrous! It wasn't fair. I think it was a way to manipulate council, because if you didn't know you couldn't even ask a sensible question or if you did you didn't give it enough thought. So that we changed. We also went to the idea of publishing the agenda in the newspaper. The public didn't know what the agenda was, either. We instituted some good things, and they must be fairly good because many of them are still in existence today.

Interviewer: We've gone one step further on the agenda now, too. We've asked for, and are receiving, all the documents we have to read the weekend before the council meeting.

Mr. Lamb: I think that's right. If you can't get it then it can lay over to the next meeting. You're too busy not to do it that way.

Interviewer: You had said that the paper wasn't as critical as it is now. You don't see any influence on the councilmembers?

Mr. Lamb: Sure, I think by virtue to that fact that the press was there sometimes people said things for the benefit of the press, but I don't feel that the influence is nearly as great as it is today because you've got the whole realm of the press including television. But yes, we were affected by them but not to any great degree.

Interviewer: Would you like to comment on any other items of interest?

Mr. Lamb: Oh, yes. I have two. And one of these was the reason I ran, I've always been amazed at our community as a whole, we're fragmented and have been more-so in the past I think between our Reformed and the Christian Reformed Church, between the townships and the city and the county all vying for the spotlight and non-cooperation. So one of the first things I did as mayor was go and introduced myself to each township supervisor, and we called a meeting at Point West, and the city hosted a meal at Point West for all the township boardmembers with the city council. It was strictly a get together to get to know each other as people and to realize that we had common problems and we had to work together. From that point on I made it a point every Christmas to see these people. Plus we started meetings and committees and as I said before we appointed township people to the goals committee I think this has been positive and good for the community. We have a lot of common boundaries and thus a lot of common problems and we can't run right up

to our border and work on one problem if they're not going to work on it on the other side it's not going to help. I think some of that atmosphere prevails to today. One item of help which I'm sure many people don't know about or appreciate is that Jay Van Wieren of Park Township was the one who was instrumental in getting the money, which was well over half a million dollars, to run a pipeline under the channel and loop our water system. Had it not been for our cooperation with these people, the Federal government wouldn't have given us the money. We didn't institute it, he did. They found out about it and followed through on it. And today we have a loop system. Whereas prior to that we didn't have, so our system is better, plus the fact if a truck would go off that North River Bridge and break that pipe, the city of Holland would have been without water. Now it's looped and thanks to the township we have a safety line. This came about through cooperation between the political entities. I think this is a must.

The other area of my concern of that time was the Spanish minorities in our community. They had problems. I'm sure that unless one is a member of a minority you really don't know how they think or feel. I've never been in that position. But I did make it a point to start working with the Spanish people. Nelson Bosman, the mayor prior to myself, started a Human Relations Commission which we worked on. We tried many ways to work with the Spanish groups, and they were fragmented, they had different groups because some were born and raised here, some were from Mexico, and some were from Texas, and they all had different problems and feelings and wants and needs. So we worked with these people, and they were appointed to different boards and commissions because we wanted to involve them in the community, too. I really think, my contribution were these two areas: the

involvement and cooperation between political groups and minority groups in our community.

Another area we tried to help was with the police and the college students. The police were having trouble with the college kids or the college kids were having trouble with the police. So we instituted a basketball game first with the police department and the college professors which of course was great for the college students. Then of course we involved the students, too, who began to play. I think the college win wise was way ahead of the police department but that's understandable. It was a way to mix people to get them to understand each other. Again, trying to get people to sit down and try and understand each other.

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