

1984

Schepers, Elmer J Oral History Interview: Former Mayors of Holland

Phil Tanis

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Tanis, Phil, "Schepers, Elmer J Oral History Interview: Former Mayors of Holland" (1984). *Former Mayors of Holland*. Paper 5.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_mayors/5

Published in: 1984 - *Former Mayors of Holland (H88-0234)* - *Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project*, January 1, 1984.
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Elmer J. Schepers,
68 Key Drive, East,
Norwalk, Ohio. 44857.
Aug. 20, 1984.

Mr. Phil Tanis,
79 W. 12th. St.,
Holland, Mich. 49423.

Dear Mr. Tanis:

I do not know you. I have never met you. However, from the description that was given me of you, that you are a young man, a Hope College Student, who has won the confidence and respect of your colleagues and community, I assure you I would like to meet you.

Your request to me for information regarding my term of office as Mayor of Holland, Mich. is especially difficult for me to put into writing and would have been less difficult if I had the opportunity to meet you in person to discuss these matters.

After over forty years have passed since my election, there is much detail that I do not remember and therefore your request becomes more difficult.

My term of office was different than most terms would have been, due to the curtailment of many things, due to World War Two. Most civic things like the Tupip Festival were suspended at that time and the war effort had top billing.

After you have analyzed all the reports you have received, I am curious to know just what your purpose is in gathering all of this information, so, after your analysis is complete I would like a copy of your report.

My report is enclosed. I hope it will be of help to you. I hope to meet you some time in the near future.

Very truly yours.


Elmer J. Schepers.

Response to questions of Mr. Phil. Tanis.

- No. 1 When were you elected to council?
I was elected as councilman on February 17, 1941 and reelected as 5th. ward councilman on Feb. 15, 1943.
- No. 2 When were you elected as Mayor?
I was elected as Mayor on February 21, 1944.
- No. 3. What was the structure of the City and City Council?
The city was divided into five or six wards and two councilmen were elected from each ward. The office of Mayor at that time was considered as an honorary position and his authority was very limited. He presided at all council meetings and only voted in case of a tie.
- No. 4 What was the city's population?
To my knowledge, the population was between fifteen and twenty thousand.
- No. 5. How much time were you putting in as Mayor? How many hours per week?
The most time consuming work was as a member of the Rationing Board which controlled the purchase of items that were considered vital for the war effort and each item applied for by a purchaser had to be examined and approved by the Board. I spent about three to four hours per day about four days a week which consumed about fifteen hours per week. Then along with meeting with heads of departments, school groups and perhaps entertaining a visiting guest, my total time of service was perhaps twenty hours per week.
- No. 6 How much were you getting paid to be Mayor?
My salary was either \$50.00 or \$100.00 per year with no allowances for expenses. I paid all my own expenses. It was not a profitable venture for me financially, however, the experience was great.
- No. 7 What was the downtown like during this time?
I believe the downtown was a lot like it is today and there were no large outside centers in existence like there are today. I would say that the merchants were very prosperous. Every one was working and making good wages, and most items, except the rationed ones, were available and people were buying. There was a parking problem however, as there were no parking facilities at the rear of stores like there are today. The banks were in good shape, having recovered completely from the depression of 1929 and 1930.

No. 8. What effect did the depression and world war two have on Holland?

These are entirely two different periods. The depression affected most people in Holland. Very much unemployment and with the banks closing made it miserable for most people. Money was all tied up in the banks and business had no money to operate. People could buy nothing but the bare necessities. Personally, I was not affected too much. I even build a two bedroom home complete for \$2800.00. The cost of the lot was \$175.00, making a complete home for less than \$3000.00, which included all wiring, heating including a full basement.

World War Two had an entirely different effect. Everybody was working and making good money, and except for the rationed items, most everything was available.

No. 9. Did the newspapers have any effect on the decisions council made?

I do not think the newspapers had any effect on the council, I do not recall that there was a reported on hand at the council meetings very many times. I only recall one time when I was approached by a reporter asking for information on anything.

No. 10. What were a few major issues you had to act on?

Due to the war, nothing major was proposed by council. Most of the people were only concerned about their sons serving in the war. My oldest boy was also included. He was in Europe for three years but returned safely at the war's end. The only major item I recall was the building of the new civic center which was much discussed and was built soon after my term of office.

No. 11. Is there anything else you wish to comment on?

Remember, you are going back forty years in my life. It has been difficult to remember much detail as to what happened at that time. Before my election, I was approached by a prominent group of citizens relative to running for the office of Mayor. They were of the opinion that the former Mayor, Mr. Geerlings, was getting to old and should be replaced by a younger man. They were of the opinion that I was the one who could defeat him so I finally agreed to enter the race. The experience was good, but at the end of my term, I still was not a politician. One more thing, in passing. I did not serve a full term as Mayor. I still had about two months to go when I bought a home outside the city on Lake Macatawa and moved into it. This made my resignation necessary. I appointed Mr. Ben Steffens to fill out my term of office.