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Visscher, Robert Oral History Interview: Former Mayors of Holland

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Name: Robert Visscher

Birthplace and date: Holland, October 9, 1917

Education:

Elementary School: Holland

Junior High School: Holland

High School: Holland

College: Stanford, Michigan State, Hope,
University of Michigan, Western Michigan

Professional Experience:

Dry Cleaner, 35 years

Parents' names and occupations:

Father: Raymond, attorney

Mother (include maiden name): Vivian Jand

Family Information:

Spouse's name (include maiden name): Jeane Beukema

Date of marriage: April 16, 1941

Childrens' names and present occupations:

Robert Pauly, Dry Cleaning

Other committees and assignments:

City Council and Mayor, Planning Commission, served on
the Hospital Board and BPW as mayor

Affiliations: Michigan Municipal League, Board of Supervisors

Honors: President of Michigan Municipal League

Present Activities: Retired

Interviewer: When were you elected to council and as mayor?

Mr. Visscher: I was elected in 1955 as Mayor. I had served on council five years before that.

Interviewer: How long did your term as mayor go?

Mr. Visscher: Six years, until 1961.

Interviewer: How and why was the Civic Center built?

Mr. Visscher: It was Mayor Harrington's (the mayor who preceeded me) idea, and for some time a lot of people in town thought we should have a building of that sort in the community. We had some plans drawn and went to a general obligation bond. A lot of people were disappointed. Some of the people thought it was going to be a youth center. Well, it didn't end up as a youth center. It ended up as an entertainment center for basketball and other activities. Some people were a little put out about it, but it was built on a general obligation bond. I think it has served a good purpose in the community. The accoustics are horrible in the building. I wasn't on the building committee so I didn't have anything to do with that. It has served a useful role in the community. Hope College has used it a lot for their basketball games. The high school used to use it and as did Christian High. There was extensive use of it during Tulip Time. It's used for other affairs: art fairs, and shuffle board for and activities for the Golden Agers. It gets good use. It wasn't really built for what a lot of people thought it was built.

Right next door to that antique place on Eighth Street used to be a building (an old store building) that had a youth center. I think a lot of people thought that this Civic Center was going to be an extension of that; that there was going to be a youth director down there and that sort of thing. It didn't turn out to be that, but that was beside the point.

Interviewer: What was the land used for before the Civic Center was built?

Mr. Visscher: Originally it was the Cappon Tannery. On the north side of Eighth Street they had great big sheds. I can remember, as a kid, where they had all the bark and everything else stored that they would use in the tanning process. At the west end of that property, where the Civic Center is actually sitting, the water table is high. They have to keep pumps going day and night there to keep the water out. I think they have their own generator in case the power fails so they can keep the pumps going.

Interviewer: There was a lot of annexation during your term. I was wondering what process was used for annexation to the city.

Mr. Visscher: That gets complicated. Do you want a great big, long explanation about it or just what we did? I'll put it simply. There were petitions signed to annex to the city of Holland. The city had to sign it, and the people of the areas had to sign it. Originally it was to go all the way to Lake Michigan and include the whole West Ottawa district and south. It was brought up by two things: 1) the people who were there wanted city services and 2) also all the kids from that whole area were going to Holland Public Schools. It was kind of a two way deal. If they wanted to go to the Holland Public Schools they were going to have to become

part of the school district. The school district and the city, in order to get the taxes right, had to be contiguous. The people on the north side weren't happy about this. They said that Holland didn't have any fire protection, and they could "fight a fire with water buckets better than the Holland Fire Department." They got quite involved and nasty. There was a lot of work done on the pros and cons. Finally it was defeated by the people on the north side. The people in the city voted in favor of it. The people out there voted against it. Finally we reduced the boundaries on the issue and took in the Maplewood area and part of Holland Heights. There were several annexations. There was a law at the time that you couldn't charge the people -- so that the millage would have been less for the people outside of the city in the school district than it would have been for the people inside the city. We didn't think this was really a fair situation. The people in West Ottawa thought it would be, and they went ahead and built their own school system. Actually the city of Holland is probably better off that we didn't annex all of that area because the need of city services there such as water, sewer, streets and police and fire were great. If you get down to it, I think their millage is as high or higher than we are paying here in the city of Holland. Besides that, they're having to pay for all of their sewer extensions and water extensions. Back in those days, you had to pay for the water. I guess you had to pay for the sewer too, but it was a real low rate, nothing compared to what it is today. Of course everything is up today. If it had been done back in those days it would have been a lot cheaper for those people to be in with the city. And we had the water plant on the north side. We could have furnished them the water.

But it got quite involved. In fact it got very dirty at times. Between Walter Scott, who was superintendent of the school district, the school board, the council, and Herb Holt who was city manager at that time, and me, we got things worked out. We had many meetings. This Walter Scott, Herb, and I got the thing worked out pretty well. Scott Bagby was our planning consultant at the time. He wasn't too much in favor of this whole thing. He said, "Go on and give them all the services, and you don't have to annex them all." Well, I'm glad we did annex what we did because we got the entire industrial park which has made a good tax base. People have been crying about this proposed mall -- about losing the taxes on that mall, but if you take all the taxes in the industrial park, that mall is peanuts compared to them. Really, I don't know what the taxes are in that area, but I know all of those companies out there amounts to a lot of tax dollars.

It takes up a lot of the slack the homeowners don't have to pay. Take East Grand Rapids. The only thing you have up in East Grand Rapids that approaches anything is Gaslight Village. All the rest is homeowners. They have to pick up all the school taxes and the running of the city and everything else except for that one little parcel called Gaslight Village. That gets to be a pretty expensive operation, and we were getting pretty much that way here in town so we had to get some industry. Did I answer that to your satisfaction?

Interviewer: Yes! And I think you answered the next few questions I had, too. Were there any problems with the land that was annexed?

Mr. Visscher: Not really. When General Electric (GE) finally came in the city; they weren't in the city at first, just like the Federal District where DeNooyer, Hart & Cooley, and K-Mart are. That's because a bunch of hard heads who lived down there

didn't want to become part of the city. But GE came into town. They wanted water and sewer, which is understandable, and they paid for the whole shot themselves. Well, we extended all these services where the city had annexed, and it was a costly thing. There's no two ways about it, to run all these trunklines to all these people. The paving and so on out there cost money, but, in the long run, I think the city came out ahead on the whole deal.

And as far as the water and sewer is concerned, the sewer at that time was controlled by the city, not by the Board of Public Works (BPW), and the water was controlled by the BPW. The BPW got returns, and it wasn't until about my second year as mayor that we started charging sewer service fees in the city. Prior to that, the sewer was free to everybody, and all these outfits got their sewer free. Then they had to start adding onto the sewer disposal plant. They had to get monies from some place. Then it came down to whether to levy taxes on the sewer service or to have a sewer service charge. Originally it was just a flat fee, "X" dollars a month or \$12 per quarter. It was something like that. Then they metered the water for the industries. We never went bankrupt. Our credit rating was always good on revenue bonds and even on G.O.'s but a lot of this work we did on revenue bonds and didn't have a bit of trouble with it at all.

Interviewer: What was the relationship between the city and the hospital?

Mr. Visscher: It was generally pretty good. I always sat in on the board meetings. It was owned by the city. That isn't like it is now. The city used to kick in quite a bit of money to the hospital to cover up their deficits. I said this is rather stupid. It's a going business -- they should be able to operate the thing on a break-even basis. I told them that at a board meeting that there would be no more

contributions from the city. It wasn't a great deal of money, but it was money that we could use other places. You'd thought I'd thrown a bomb in that room. In that board room, the world was coming to an end, They cried, "The city's always done this." I said, "Not any more." I said, "You work out your budget some way so that you can come up with a balanced budget." They have ever since then. They weren't too happy about that. We got along real fine after that. The administrator up there at that time was Fred Bird. I always got along with him very well. As well as with the other members of the board: John Donelly (president of the board) and Clarence Becker (president of the board). They were friends of mine. They understood. They were business men.

You didn't have anything in here that I can see about the BPW (Board of Public Works).

Interviewer: Would you like to talk about the BPW?

Mr. Visscher: Yeah! I think the BPW basically has been a good operation for the city. There have been members of council who have wanted to sell it to Consumers Power Company. We had one member who was just vehement on the subject. Anything that the BPW wanted to do he was against -- expansion and anything. Under the charter we're operating under now, the city was to get 50% of the net profit of the BPW. They had to get into some expansion programs because the use of electricity kept on climbing up. We reduced our income to a set amount -- I forgot what it was: 100,000 or 150,000 or something like that. The budgets back in those days are nothing like they are today. Anyway, we reduced our take from the BPW. Really I think they have been a great asset to the city of Holland -- the power plant and the water plant. People were grumbling about the sewer service

charges, but if that's what it has to be, that's what it has to be. What else can it be? I think that the Board has been well run over all the years, and I'm real proud of their operation down there. Now, our electricity here in town costs us considerably less than the people who are buying from Consumers in the area. Consumers is going to go up now with this Midland deal. Originally, the Board members were elected, but under the new charter they were appointed by the mayor and the council. The BPW was very upset about that change. They finally came around to recognize the fact that that was the way it was going to be. They didn't want to be subservient to the council, but council was the governing body of the city. As I said, I'm really proud of the BPW and what they've done for the people of the city. Some people gripe about it, but they don't know the inner workings of it at all.

Interviewer: What were your council meetings like?

Mr. Visscher: They were really pretty good. The old council -- when I was first on it, before the new charter -- had two council members from every ward. There wasn't anybody at large. That used to get a little sticky once in a while. Before I was on it they used to get into some pretty big fights. However, when Harry was mayor he ran a good council, and Steffans ran a good council. Then I instituted a study session for council where the public was invited. The nights that we had council meetings we met down at the hotel and we had a dinner there. We'd talk over the agenda. We wouldn't take any votes on things but people would express their opinions. You couldn't take a vote there. Some people started saying everything was cut and dried. It probably was cut and dried. It made for a nice smooth council meeting. We used to get into a few little squabbles once and a while

on the floor. Everybody wouldn't agree even in the pre-council meetings. Our council meetings would last all the way from twenty minutes to maybe an hour and a half or two hours. I always got along very well with my council members. I didn't have any trouble with any of them. I was really proud of that. There was one fellow, Ray Howard, who was principal of the Christian Schools, who used to tangle with me once in a while, but it was a friendly thing. We understood each other. He was an ultra-conservative, and I've classified myself more as a moderate. He was a fine fellow, and we did work well together.

Interviewer: What was the downtown area like?

Mr. Visscher: It was much as it is today, except for the parking. Practically the only parking was on River Avenue and Eighth Street. Herb and I tried to get through a deal where we would buy up considerable property for parking downtown. We went to a vote on it -- we didn't have to -- but we went to a vote. The people turned it down. The reason we went to a vote was we could get a lower rate of interest -- doing it under a G.O. than under a revenue bond. The people turned it down. They said let the downtown merchants provide all their own parking. That isn't the city's obligation. The people want to park some place so you have to furnish parking spaces for them. If you don't, they're going to go some other place to park. Well, we started working. We had some money in the parking meter fund, and we bought some property. Boy, did that cause a stink! Some of the people thought we used up the money in the parking meter fund. Then we went into lease arrangements. Do you remember where Kresge's was in Holland? Probably not, but you do know where Teerman's is? A lot of that property was owned by the Walsh Estate. We worked out arrangements with them to lease the property. Then we

condemned some houses on Ninth Street across from the Armory. I think there were three houses in there that we had condemned for parking. We paid for that out of the parking meter fund. We had some money in the parking meter fund. If hadn't been for -- I'm not putting myself on the mantle or anything -- but if it hadn't been for myself we probably still wouldn't have had any parking downtown.

They think downtown is going to die. I wish they'd take all those parking meters right off from Eighth Street and be done with it. I think the council's trying to come to alter that. That's what should be done. There hasn't been much change in the buildings. Some of them have improved; like Teerman's and Loker-Rutgers and First of Michigan. They took out some old buildings. There was a theatre and some other buildings. Marsiljes had a building there which the bank bought. There have been some changes, but there's a lot to be done as far as facelifting in the downtown area. To improve it, to make it look better much more must be done. Now if you can get these Hollanders to spend the money for it or not that's going to something else.

Interviewer: What did the Municipal Judge do?

Mr. Visscher: He did what the district court does today. He was a real good fellow. His name was Neal Vandermeulen. He did a "bang up job" as Municipal Judge. He'd take care of traffic violations and the drunks and the small claims, etc. It was about what the district court does today. It was an elected position.

Interviewer: There seemed to be a lot of public improvements like paving streets and sidewalks. I was wondering why this was done and how it was financed.

Mr. Visscher: I told you that I believed that the sidewalks were all paid for by the

residents. Council ordered in many blocks of sidewalks, and the people had thirty days to comply with it. If they didn't, the city would come on in, do it, and charge them for it, and put it on your tax bill. So far as street paving was concerned, if over 50 percent of the people in the block signed a petition requesting the paving then the council would hold a hearing on it, and then they would order it in or not order it in. Usually they would order it in because they had had the initial petition of over 50 percent. The people could pay it all off at the end of the deal and not pay any interest on it. If they chose, they could pay it off over a ten year period and it was financed by revenue bonds. They weren't general obligation bonds but revenue bonds, which worked out all right. A person could pay it off over ten years. But the sidewalks were just ordered in. That was all there was to it.

Interviewer: Were those mainly ordered in in the annexed areas?

Mr. Visscher: All over.

Interviewer: So there was no real set sidewalk plan before that?

Mr. Visscher: Well, yes.

Interviewer: But was it followed?

Mr. Visscher: It was followed. The old original town went up to Sixteenth Street. Then the state came on in and ordered the city (I don't know if it went to Twenty-Fourth Street that time and then went to Thirty-Second Street). I think they went from Sixteenth Street to Thirty-Second Street; but don't hold me to that. That's the way I recollect. That's before I was born. The state came in and said this is the city of Holland, and you're going over to Fairbanks Avenue and jogged around

that way. That's how that happened. All of that wasn't paved. When I was a kid we used to live down on Thirteenth Street between College and Central. When I was a kid, Thirteenth Street wasn't paved but the sidewalk was in. Eventually they paved Thirteenth Street, and they kept on moving paving.

We had a very good city engineer. In fact, I found a picture of him in all this material. He had been the city engineer for 46 years. When he retired, the council gave him a lounge chair. He was a very fine city engineer. He had all of these procedures planned out thoroughly. We didn't have the mechanical equipment we have today. In the winter time, he had a tremendous workcrew, and they used to do a lot of hand shoveling of snow on Eighth Street. Maybe I'm rattling on too much --

Interviewer: No, no, no.

Mr. Visscher: For instance, when they put the sewer line in here on Twenty-Eighth Street where I live they dug it all by hand. They put down sheeting, they'd get down there and dig that all out, and put that pipe in the ground. That's the way he kept his workforce busy when they weren't shoveling snow or doing something else.

Interviewer: And that would keep them busy!

Mr. Visscher: Yes! He kept them busy! Jake did a marvelous job, he really did, and he was well thought of, well respected in the city of Holland by everybody. You've got to give a lot of credit to Jake for developing those plans for the streets and the sidewalks.

Interviewer: What were some of your highlights as mayor?

Mr. Visscher: Well, I think the annexation was probably the highlight of being mayor.

Interviewer: That about doubled the size of Holland, didn't it?

Mr. Visscher: Oh, it more than doubled the size of the city. The city was only two miles square. It was two miles from north to south and two miles from east to west. That wasn't very much territory. Ride around today and see how much was annexed. Nothing has been annexed since I've been out of office.

Interviewer: That's a lot of territory!

Mr. Visscher: We took in a lot of land. I think really that was the highlight of my mayoralty. There were other highlights: being president of the Michigan Municipal League. That was a real honor. I got to know a lot of wonderful people as well as some people who weren't so wonderful. Getting back to the League, I got to know a lot of fine people through the League. One of the highlights was at Mackinac Island at the League's annual meeting. John Huss, who was director League of the time, set me down next to Bishop Fullton Shean. Do you remember Bishop Fullton Shean or have you ever heard of him?

Interviewer: No.

Mr. Visscher: He used to be on the radio and then on the television. He was a Catholic bishop. I always enjoyed him on the television, but I really got to enjoy him up at Mackinac Island. It was Friday night. We were having our big meal. Everybody was having prime rib except the Catholics. Fish was on the menu for the Catholics. He turned to me and said, "I just hate fish!" (laughter)

Interviewer: Anything else you wish to comment on?

Mr. Visscher: I've been having a lot of fun going through this scrap book. My wife kept this for me.

We then looked through his scrapbook which had many pictures from his days as mayor.

Mr. Visscher: I've taken enough of your time. I don't know if I've been of any help to you or not.

Interviewer: You have. Thank you very much

We then talked about a few other things before Mr. Visscher remembered that I was going to interview Bill Wichers for this project. He wanted to make some comments about Mr. Wichers which I thought should be taped.

Mr. Visscher: Mr. Wichers is one person here in the community who I'm glad you asked to participate in this whole deal. I think Bill has been one of the real fine institutions in this community. Maybe you shouldn't call a person an institution, but I think Bill is an institution, and he's done so much for the city of Holland in so many different areas such as being on the Planning Commission. I was on the Planning Commission with him. I was council representative of the Planning Commission, and then of course I sat on it when I was mayor. Bill and I always got along real fine.

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