

1-1-1984

## Wichers, Willard C Oral History Interview: Former Mayors of Holland

Phil Tanis

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland\\_mayors](http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_mayors)



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

**Repository citation:** Tanis, Phil, "Wichers, Willard C Oral History Interview: Former Mayors of Holland" (1984). *Former Mayors of Holland*. Paper 7.

[http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland\\_mayors/7](http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_mayors/7)

**Published in:** 1984 - *Former Mayors of Holland (H88-0234)* - *Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project*, January 1, 1984.  
Copyright © 1984 Hope College, Holland, MI.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Former Mayors of Holland by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@hope.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@hope.edu).

## INTRODUCTION

Robert Visscher, after his interview was completed, requested the tape recorder turned back on so that he could make one last comment. That comment was about Bill Wichers, and Mr. Visscher described him as "an institution" in Holland. Nothing less could be true. Mr. Wichers has been serving Holland -- both the city and country -- for most of his lifetime. A glance at his curriculum vitae will bear this out.

There are two accomplishments out of all his activities, though, which I feel are even more outstanding than the rest. Mr. Wichers pioneered the Netherlands Museum, helping found it in 1937 and has directed it ever since. He has captured the spirit of Holland in this museum and allowed the rest of the world to enjoy it. Without this museum and its active director, much of Holland's past would probably have been lost.

Mr. Wichers also was a key player in obtaining De Zwaan, the 300-year-old-plus Dutch windmill which is the center of attraction on Windmill Island. Travelling in the Netherlands and using his connections there, Mr. Wichers was able to do the impossible: bring a historically marked windmill from the Netherlands to the United States. Since its dedication in 1965, Windmill Island has grown and prospered, attracting more and more people to it -- and without any taxpayers' money spent on it. It has been fully self supporting, another great accomplishment.

Mr. Wichers, in all his work, has kept alive the spirit and preserved the history of Holland, something for which he cannot be thanked enough.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### WILLARD C. WICHERS

Name: Willard C. Wickers

Residence: 267 Central Avenue, Holland, Michigan 49423

Wife: Nell Elizabeth (Van Haitsma)

Children: Elizabeth Anne (Mrs. Theodore Du Mez)  
Janet Louise (Mrs. David Waanders)

Birthplace and Date: Zeeland, Michigan, March 20, 1909

Education: Zeeland Elementary Schools  
Zeeland High School  
Hope College, A.B.  
University of Michigan

Religious Affiliation: Member, Third Reformed Church, Holland, Michigan  
Member Greater Consistory, Served as Elder and Deacon

Professional Affiliation: Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs:  
Netherlands Information Service, Director Midwestern  
Division, 1942-1974  
Netherlands Consul for Press and Cultural Affairs,  
1974-1982  
President-Director, Netherlands Museum,  
since its organization in 1937-present  
Netherlands-American Resource Center, Coordinator,  
1982-present

Clubs: Holland Rotary Club  
Holland Professional Club, Charter Member,  
Secretary, Past President  
Holland Century Club, President, 1975-1976  
Holland Country Club

Public Service;  
Current Responsibilities: Hope College - Member, Board of Trustees,  
1949-present  
Holland Historical Cultural Commission, 1978-present  
City of Holland, Windmill Committee, 1964-present  
Holland Area Arts Council, 1964-present  
Holland Tulip Time Committee  
Holland Area Historical Advisory Commission  
Michigan Historical Commission, 1950-present  
President, 1951-52; 1957-58; 1963-64; 1969-70; 1978-79  
Cultural Advisor, Dutch Immigrant Society  
Dutch-American Historical Commission, Commissioner  
Holland Harbor Lighthouse Historical Commission, President  
1971-present  
Netherlands-American Amity Trust, Board of Directors  
1980-present

Public Service;

Current Responsibilities:  
(continued)

Historical Society of Michigan, Honorary Trustee  
and Past President  
American Association of Museums, Member, The  
Visiting Committee Museum Accrediation,  
1970-1976  
Netherlands Pioneer and Historical Foundation,  
Secretary, 1937-present  
Cappon House Historical Commission, Founder and  
Task Force Member, 1979-present

Recognitions and Awards:

Knight, Netherlands Order of Oranje Nassau, 1947  
Officer, Netherlands Order of Oranje Nassau, 1954  
"Service Above Self" Award - Rotary International,  
March 1973  
City of Holland Citation for Community Service,  
January 1973  
Royal Netherlands Tourist Association "Edo Bergsma  
ANWB Prize", for promoting American Tourism  
in the Netherlands and fostering Dutch-American  
Relations, 1973  
L.H.D. (Doctor of Humane Letters), Hope College, 1979  
Governor's Certificate of Appreciation, May 1982.  
Phi Alpha Theta, International Honor Society in  
History, 1982  
Historical Society of Michigan, Award of Merit, 1977  
American Association for State and Local History,  
Award of Merit, 1983

Past Public Service:

Hope College, Secretary of the Board of Trustees  
1949-1982  
Michigan Historic Preservation Review Board,  
1969-1975  
The Netherlands-America Foundation, Inc. Director  
1971-1981  
City of Holland Planning Commission, 1952-72;  
Chairman, 1953-1964  
Manager, Tulip Time Festival of Holland, 1946-1950  
City of Holland Bicentennial Commission, 1975-1976  
Ottawa County Bicentennial Commission, 1975-1976  
Nell V. Wichers Travel Service, Founder & Vice Pres.  
1945-1955  
Midwest Museums Conference of American Assoc. of  
Museums, President  
Netherlands-America University League of North -  
America, Vice Pres. & Director  
Hope College - Director of Alumni Relations  
Holland Library Commission  
Board of Theological Education, Reformed Church in  
America, 1967-1970  
New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Member, Board  
of Superintendents, 1963-1967  
Permanent Committee on Theological Education of the  
Reformed Church in America  
Michigan Division of the American Association for the  
United Nations, Member, Board of Direc-  
tors, 1963-1970; 1973-1977  
Michigan Governor's Commission for Refugees and Dis-  
placed persons  
Grand Valley State College Advisory Council  
History Committee of Michigan Cultural Commission  
Citizen's Advisory Committee, Michigan Association of  
Professions  
Michigan Observance for United Nations Day, Chairman,  
1957, 1958, 1959, 1983  
Michigan Council for International Education  
Michigan Colleges Foundation - Trustee  
West Shore Symphony, Member, Board of Directors  
American Relief for Holland, Secretary, Ottawa-Allegan  
Chapter  
Adult Education Association - Member, Public Relations  
and Planning Committee  
Netherlands American Bicentennial Commission, Board  
of Directors, 1980-1982

Past Business Affiliations:

Holland Cotton Products Company, Vice Pres. and Secretary  
Radio Station WHTC, Vice President and Secretary

Interview with Mr. Bill Wichers

Interviewer: Could you outline the course of the relationship Holland has had with the Netherlands?

Mr. Wichers: I'd be happy to do that, Phil. I would suspect, and historically we'd find this true, that from the very start of the settlement there has been a rather continuing relationship. The immigrants who came under Van Raalte, of course, had no opportunity to return; those pioneer settlers. But they did have, through correspondence, rather active, continuing ties with their families back home and with old friends. Later on, of course, as the settlement grew, I'm thinking now the post-Civil War period, industries and people were more settled. There were a number of people who found the opportunity to return. My own grandfather, for example, did go back and spent a few months visiting family. And I believe this was not entirely unusual for these people to have these ties. In the 20th Century this practice became more common with better steamers, and transportation still was not too expensive, and this was a more common occurrence.

Then, early on, representatives of the Dutch government were coming here more formally. There was a long established consular office in Chicago, and we know these people would be coming up here for special occasions. And then I'm thinking particularly of the rather remarkable role that President Kollen of Hope College had. In 1905, he was made a knight in the Order of Orange Nassau which was the personal order of the Queen, the Royal House of Orange, the Royal Family. Queen Wilhelmina directed this order be conferred upon him. And in the citation it read "in recognition of his service in behalf of the decedents of Hollanders in

America, the Queen's former subjects." So President Kollen was recognized for his service to people of Dutch birth. Later on he was appointed a delegate by President Theodore Roosevelt to the international Opium Conference which was held in the Hague; he was also on the delegation to represent the United States at the dedication of the Peace Palace. This was really early on in this century.

Then the ties with the college and the community with the Netherlands were very strong in the era of Gerrit J. Diekema who was a very prominent citizen. He served on the Board of Trustees of Hope College as secretary, I believe, and was very active in Dutch-American affairs; was a candidate for governor of Michigan; and was appointed United States minister to the Netherlands. So those ties in that era were very strong.

During the 1930's efforts were made to strengthen the friendship between this community and Holland in Europe. Understand that it was broader because the people, citizens of the community, would be involved in these as well. When Dr. Wichers was President of the college, he was the principal speaker on Netherlands Day at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, the great World's Fair of its time in August of 1933. And then later on, of course, came the first visit that then-Princess Juliana made. She had been sent for safety to Canada after the Netherlands was occupied, and the government of the Netherlands was in exile in London. The first visit that the Princess Juliana made symbolically was to Holland, Michigan in 1941 which was also the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the chartering of Hope College. It was an event, and General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) scheduled their meeting in Holland as well. And so she and her husband Prince Bernhard came here on their first United States

visit which was very important. She returned here later as Queen in 1953 when she made the official state visit which took her and Prince Bernhard all across the country which included Holland, Michigan and a visit there.

In the interim, there were a number of people, of high rank; ambassadors and government officials that visited Holland, Michigan and then Prince Bernhard came in 1965 at the dedication of the windmill. Princess Margriet and her husband, Peter Van Vollenhoven, came in 1972 on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the city of Holland which was an important highlight. In 1982 Queen Beatrix and her husband, Prince Claus were here on their American visit marking two centuries of continuous diplomatic ties between our two nations.

In addition to all of this, there was the large immigrant movement in the post-war period when thousands of people left the Netherlands for the United States in vast numbers and settled in the Western Michigan area, and many hundreds settled here in Holland, Michigan. The government established an official office here which I was privileged to head from 1942 onward, a division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Information and Cultural Affairs office served 20 of the states in the United States from Holland, Michigan. This also increased the ties. Well, I believe those are examples of how these ties have been officially important and also on the more personal basis between citizens.

Interviewer: What did the Centennial Commission do?

Mr. Wichers: Well, let me start back by saying that the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Dutch communities was a great celebration in 1897. Back in about 1935 some of us began to take a look at the centennial, particularly people in



history. I was, at that time, supervising an historical records survey of the western half of the state of Michigan, a federal government project during the depression years. There were a lot of people here, old families. I'm thinking of the Marsiljes, the Keppels, the Ten Cates, and numerous other families who were the first families who could trace thier roots right back to the pioneer settlers. We had organized a committee to look at this and decided we should begin to plan and make people aware of such history. So we organized a two day conference in which the Dutch settlements all around in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa were asked to send representatives, and most of them did; towns like Pella, Orange City, Cedar Grove, and Alto, Wisconsin. At that time we talked about a number of things, developed an agenda of what we should do. We should begin to plan, observing the centennial with each community's founding.

So out of that came the organization of the Netherlands Pioneer and Historical Foundation, and it was agreed that this would be a type of federation; that we would work jointly on a number of projects and yet each community was encouraged to set up its own committee for the observance of the hundredth anniversary of their settlement. Some of these were going to occur a little later; like they all weren't going to occur in 1947, some were a year later like in, 1948, '49 depending on when the pioneers came. At the same time we decided on a number of guidelines, among these the fact that so many of these settlements had been centered around a church movement, that the churches should all be involved. There would be both a secular and religious aspect; a religious observance and the community observance. In our planning we formed a committee, and we said in Holland we're going to celebrate on February 9, the date that the first group arrived under Van Raalte. We're going to observe that each year while we plan for

the centennial in 1947. So we had a big celebration in 1937, held in the chapel with a speaker and music, our first historical display. So this was all done leading to the actual centennial. In the other communities they did not all follow that same pattern, but they were all planning at least for the hundredth anniversary, and they did this in their own way, but we coordinated through this central committee.

Here in Holland it was very impressive. All the churches held special services of commemoration. We urged them to do it close to the February 9 date for one thing but then to look at the date of their own founding and, even though they had been organized later, perhaps to take that Sunday and have a special commemoration service. The schools had programs for the children. Tulip Time, of course, had a centennial theme. We had a number of events going on. We had, in addition to February, a whole big event in August of that year.

One of the important things we did, I think, was this committee looked at what would be a rather permanent contribution. Should we finish trying to raise money for the monument that was supposed to be built in 1897? That committee had plans for a monument to the pioneers. We said we think there is something more important that we might do. For instance, there is no adequate history of the community and of these Dutch settlements. We should publish a really authoritative work. And we made that decision. Then we said, who is the most qualified historian in the United States who could do that? And it was decided that Henry Lucas, Professor of History at the University of Washington, was that man. The University of Washington gave him a special year-long sabbatical. He came here, worked on our manuscripts in our archives. He went to the Netherlands. He had often been in the Netherlands. He had published extensively on some aspects

of the immigration. He had grown up in Graafschap. He had spent a couple of years at Hope College, graduated from the University of Michigan, knew Dutch very well. The outcome of that was the publication of Netherlanders in America, now out of print which we want to reprint if we can. The University of Michigan Press cooperated and they published that book. Then there was subsequent to that the two volume work published in the Netherlands, Dutch Memoirs and Immigrant Writings, a very important work as well.

So this was then, in essence, the centennial. There were musical programs, a special historical pageant produced by the college and the community; an endless number of events that were scheduled. At the time of the 90th anniversary Henry Geerlings was mayor, and at the time of the centennial Mayor Ben Steffens was in office and took a prominent part in all these celebrations. Of course we had the Netherlands Ambassador come up and many dignitaries came throughout that year.

Interviewer: What did Holland do for its 125th birthday?

Mr. Wichers: We had again, a really community wide celebration, Phil. We started it off with the Sunday closest to February 9 with a large religious service in Dimnent Chapel. Lester DeKoster, who was editor at the time of the Christian Reformed Church publication, "The Banner", was our speaker. Then we concentrated a good deal on making Tulip Time Festival the theme for the 125th anniversary, but most of our activities we decided to hold during August. It was vacation time. We thought with a number of holiday people here, summer would be a good time to do that. We had at the new DeWitt Center a 17th Century Dutch Masterpiece exhibition, 43 paintings, which was a very monumental exhibition. There was a Mayor's Night, with performances of "Knickerbocker Holiday", at the Hope summer

theatre. One night there was square dancing in the Civic Center parking lot, and also there was a demonstration by our Hispanic community of some of their dances, and of course our Klompen Dancers put on a performance. That was a great, fun evening. We held a Children's Art Show in Centennial Park and a pet show for children at Lincoln Park. We staged an old fashioned parade with bands all dressed in old costumes, a really amusing, fun night. Then the U.S. Marine band performed at Kollen Park. We held family bicycle tours, a youth religious rally, a tour of the colony as we said, all the early Dutch settlements like Drenthe, Vriesland, Groningen, Graafschap, and Overijssel.

This 125th anniversary was a fun time, climaxed by the visit of Princess Margriet and Peter Van Vollenhoven. A community reception was held for them and an appearance at the Chapel where an official ceremony occurred. This was followed by a luncheon at the Yacht Club. A parade of boats, a whole flotilla of boats, going up the lake with the Princess at the helm of one of the lead boats and her husband navigating. The Princess met Mr. Van Vollenhoven when he was at Leiden University. Peter Van Vollenhoven was not a prince but was the fellow student who she married. He was a very good pianist and had his own jazz group at the university. So, at the Yacht Club, we'd arranged, with some difficulty, an old time jazz group that could really play jazz. And we arranged that Mr. Van Vollenhoven would be invited to come to the piano and play for them. This made a big hit. So it was a jolly fun time. This was a real good celebration. And all kinds of people involved in all aspects, a very broad type of celebration for the 125th birthday.

Interviewer: In 1982 there was a national observance and celebration of 200 years

of uninterrupted diplomatic relations between the United States and the Netherlands. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what happened in Holland for this celebration.

Mr. Wichers: Yes, I'd be very pleased to do that, Phil. As you know, I served on the National Committee and it was a very impressive total observance nation-wide. Here are a few of the highlights, taking place in Holland. We joined with Zeeland in some of the observances. We brought the miniature village, called Madurodam, part of which was in this country and is usually shown in the Hague. We showed this at the Zeeland High School gymnasium, and that was a great success. People came from all over West Michigan to see this spectacular miniature village representative of a cross-section of old Holland. Hope College and Calvin College and the communities of Grand Rapids and Holland sponsored a concert of the Hague Residency Orchestra, one of the world's great orchestras, and that was an event that attracted great attention. Later on in the year there was the Conference on the Influence of Dutch Theology on American Life. We had scholars from many parts of the country giving papers and looking at the influence, especially early on; the colonial Dutch period in the East and then subsequently the midwest including the organization of the Christian Reformed Church, the theological views and the impact and influence on the social and religious life which the Dutch had on the American scene. For Tulip Time the whole theme was devoted to the 200th anniversary. The parade theme was representative of the 200 years. The Women's Garden Club used this theme. We also had a Tulip Time group of folk dancers, that performed daily, from the Netherlands. Also there was a group of people demonstrating crafts. Needlework, making of tile, and a number of interesting crafts were demonstrated. At the museum we showed all items that were either of

the era of the 200th anniversary or items that were older than we had that were Dutch.

And, of course, all of this was climaxed with the visit of Queen Beatrix and Prince Claus. Now, you will recall the welcome in the park, in Centennial Park, in the morning. They were welcomed officially by then-Mayor Richard Smith; they rode in the open carriage to Hope College; and the Queen's address took place at Hope College and then on to the community picnic at Kollen Park, the one event on the Queen's whole national itinerary which was purely an American family tradition, an outdoor summer picnic. And it made a great hit with the Queen and Prince Claus. So the community did itself proud, and thousands of people participated, and it meant much to everyone, especially to those of Dutch birth or Dutch extraction.

Interviewer: When and why was the Planning Commission formed and what were some of the first things it did?

Mr. Wichers: Phil, I believe it was December 1949, the council adopted the necessary enabling legislation for a city plan. Now this was done under the state legislation which was in place that permitted cities that were the size of Holland to create a City Planning Commission and to undertake a city planning study. The legislation called for the membership that comprised the mayor, an administrative officer of the city, a member of council, plus six citizen members appointed by the mayor and council. By this time it was, of course, very, very necessary because Holland was rapidly growing in this period after World War II. The form of government was changing under the charter. It was changing to a city manager form of government. The old committee system really was not practical anymore at this era in the city's growth and this is why it came into being.

Interviewer: What were some of the first things it did?

Mr. Wichers: One of the first things it did was to seek a professional. We looked at some of the problems that we saw ahead, and we were advised and realized the zoning ordinance, which was very much out of date, would have to be updated and that we really needed to engage a professional planner. And so the city council authorized us to look about to find a competent city planner. Many applications were reviewed and finally Scott Bagby, of Grand Rapids -- who was working nation-wide but was a resident of Grand Rapids -- was chosen; the first couple of years was really a study by Mr. Bagby with the members of the Planning Commission on all aspects of the city and publication of a master plan. We did point out some principles that appeared in the master plan. It was stressed that there was an interdependence of the city and the surrounding townships, and, while annexation might be desirable, it was not necessarily the major concern or necessarily the answer to the problems. The fact that we should establish sound, basic planning goals and directions was important. Whether or not there was annexation we felt, at the time, was somewhat incidental.

There were two basic problems which we identified with the help of our professional, Mr. Bagby. One was the deterioration of the urban, central city, urban blight as it's described. Many of the fine homes were simply too large to maintain as they had been in an earlier era when maid service was easily available. These houses were deteriorating. Also there was what was described as suburban sprawl, where people were just building homes anywhere where there were really no city services at all. They might be lucky if they had a well, and then the question of sanitation became a growing problem as the city and the outlying areas

were developing so fast. So all of these matters tended to bring a heavier total burden on the tax base. The Planning Commission identified the fact that as this continued it would put a much heavier than usual burden on homeowners as well as on the commercial and industrial areas to provide these utilities, and this really was not right to impose more than their fair share of the tax load on them. Thus Planning Commission decided there had to be service areas, areas where commercial development could be directed and where industrial development would prosper. Early on, in the initial master plan, for instance, a proposed area for an industrial park was proposed; street patterns and placing new schools were advocated. We had some early on battles -- or rather disputes I'd say -- with the school authorities, where to place schools. We urged them to apply planning principles and study where the growth was going to be, where the city would be extending services like water and sewer to new areas so the schools could be properly planned. The whole question of industrial zones that were going to be serviced, what could be done to reverse the deteriorating inner-city areas and how we could guide the suburban development in a way that the people could enjoy services which could be provided at reasonable cost.

The Planning Commission, as I said, had an educational job to do in all phases. The downtowns all over America were in the process of full decay. There were a number of reasons for that. The advent of the malls and the fact that there was a lack of nearby parking; all these and other problems. At the time the bypass was not yet in place. All of the traffic on US-31 and M-21 was rumbling down River Avenue. The traffic going north to Grand Haven continued northward on US-31. The traffic headed for M-21 turned right at River and Eighth Street. As these huge trucks and semis began to be common, this created a frightful condition, and



Planning Commission took the initiative on that and, working with the Highway Department, at least got that route changed so the M-21 traffic was diverted to Seventh Street, Seventh Street going east.

Then the Planning Commission started, with city council's help, on the development of off-street parking. With the merchants cooperation an educational program was staged so they would all understand the importance. Because this was done at that time it has contributed very much to the continuing health of the downtown business area. We were always, as Planning Commission, very concerned because we recognized the central business area was an important tax base for the community, and that is the reason, too, we wanted to get a handle on new industrial development, and why, early on, the Planning Commission was advocating an industrial park which later developed so beautifully under the auspices of the city and the Chamber of Commerce and HEDCOR. The recommendation which council failed to implement was the perimeter truck route. This may be a major problem in the future.

There were many things Planning Commission did: the institution of the sign ordinance; the establishment of major street routes; cooperation with the city; as I said earlier, working with the school board and planning the location of the new schools, limiting existing neighborhood school areas and creating new, more spacious areas.

I think you could characterize, Phil, the era of the fifties and sixties as a period of great, steady growth and development of single family homes. This was the trend, especially the ranch-type homes and large lots. Then there was, in the seventies, a sort of a boom in mobile homes and town houses. We saw that in that

era. So Planning Commission responded to this trend. It's extremely vital that the work of the Planning Commission and council go hand in hand; it is very, very important because the placement and development of streets, water mains, sanitary sewers are all very, very costly projects, and you cannot afford to offer this service just on a hit and miss basis. It has to be accomplished through some definite planning in mind. We looked at the airport problems early on; the policy on private streets in the condominium developments, under the new State legislation the planned residential developments.

I don't know whether this target will be reached or not; we were working with a target at one time, that by 1990 the population in the city of Holland would be 38,683. I don't know that we're going to reach that, but we won't be far off on that target. That's an old target study conducted by the State Highway Department. It was a figure we used at that time.

Interviewer: Could you outline the steps of annexation to the city?

Mr. Wichers: Yes, I'll try and do that, Phil. As Holland was growing rapidly, the surrounding townships, especially on the northside, were as well. And they had the same needs as the city: water and sewer, schools. And the question facing the city council was: how do we do this? Well, it was felt, you could scarcely offer these services unless they were part of the community and there was a tax base to support the services. There was a Citizens Annexation Advisory Committee formed. Next there was a Citizens for a United Community. And from that a steering committee, which reported monthly -- this was chaired by Clarence Jalving -- but there were representatives of all of the surrounding townships on it.

And their report, April 11, 1957, recommended that the annexation issue be voted upon. The election was held on November 19, 1957, a little later that same year. It was put on the ballot in the townships and in the city. It passed in the city. It was defeated in Holland, Park, Fillmore, and Laketown townships. And overall, the issue failed. The mayor, Mayor Robert Visscher, at the council meeting the next night, when they officially tabulated the vote, gave a very positive message, saying that they accepted this vote, and observed that we're all part of the same community and pledged to work together on the common interests of the total community. The townships that had favored it were disappointed of course.

As a result there were subsequently independent actions in these districts. And some of the representatives on the central committee like Henry Kleinheksel, James Lugers, Walter Vander Haar, men like that took leadership positions in their own areas. And so these areas voted to annex. They petitioned the city council to join the city, and this strategy which was changed then, paid off, and they did it by these areas, and it was ruled by the attorneys this was a proper procedure. Thus on July 4, 1958, Apple Avenue and Montello Park were officially received by the city council; on August 2, 1958, about a month later, the Maplewood district; the next year, June 5, 1959, Holland Heights and Central Park areas were received; then on June 2, 1961, three smaller areas of Laketown Township were accepted for annexation; and December 29, 1969, the Waverly Heights group annexed. That is about the present, or that is the present boundary now of the city.

Interviewer: Could you outline the steps toward the formation of Windmill Island and aquisition of the windmill?

Mr. Wichers: Oh, I can talk all day about that, Phil. Let me tell you a little bit about that interesting story. It was the dog days of August, 1961 that a longtime friend, a very marvelous gentleman, the late Carter Brown, who was the owner of the Castle, came into my office where we're sitting, and said, "Bill, I was brought here by my parents when I was an infant of less than a year old. And I've been coming here for seventy or more years." And he said, "I love this community as you know." And he said, "I would like to do something. I don't have much money to do it with, but I have an idea." He said, "I think Holland is such a wonderful community, such a great heritage, we should have something that would symbolize to every visitor coming in that this is a Dutch town." Now he said, "We've got the Museum and we've got the Wooden Shoe Factory and there are other things that remind people the town is Dutch." But he said, "There ought to be something that just--"

And I said, "Well, what do you have in mind, Carter?"

"Oh," he said, "a windmill."

"Oh," I said, "that's a great idea." I said, "Just a second." So I excused myself and got a set of plans for a windmill because we had a set of blueprints for a windmill because, believe it or not, we had many, many inquiries from people who wanted to build windmills for their gardens or something.

And he looked at those and said, "No. No. I don't mean that. I mean a real windmill from the Netherlands."

"Oh," I said, "Carter, that's a very nice idea, but that's impossible."

"What do you mean it's impossible?"

"Well," I said, "Here's the story. There used to be all kinds of windmills in the Netherlands and now there're less than 900. And the government now has, under national legislation, put them under the national monument law. They're all protected as monuments. You cannot, if you own a windmill, do anything with it unless you go through a whole procedure." And I outlined what that was, that you had to go before a provincial group and then this went on to the state. If for example, your windmill was the only one in the town, that had something to do with the horizon, the appearance of the towns, you couldn't take it down. If you could not afford to repair it, there would be money to help and so on. If your windmill was in such bad condition that it didn't seem feasible, and there were a lot of mills like it in the neighborhood; if you could take it down, the parts were put into a bank, a parts bank, and saved for the preservation and reconstruction of other mills. So I said, "This was just impossible. I'm sorry but that's the way it is. That's the law."

Well he said, "Think about it." A couple of days later he said, "You been thinking about my idea?"

And I said, "I've been thinking about your idea. It's great. I can get more plans probably from the Netherlands but we can't do as you suggest."

"Well," he said, "I don't know," and grumbled a little bit and said, "everything's possible."

So anyway, he talked with me a couple times and I told him the same story. Then I left town for three weeks to go to accompany, handle public relations, for the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra. And I was travelling and that was a demanding trip, arranging for the conductor to be interviewed by the press and so on. And I got back and Nell said to me, "Oh," she said, "you have to be at a breakfast tomorrow morning. Mayor Bosman has called a breakfast and a number of people are going to be there."

I said, "What's that all about?"

"Oh, Mr. Brown's windmill idea."

"Oh," I said, "Gosh." I was disgusted. So I said, "Oh." and I was tired, you know, and I said, "Well, O.K."

She said, "You've got to be there. I promised you'd be there."

There was Mayor Bosman, Henry Maentz and members of the council and the Chamber and a big group, and Carter Brown with a big grin on his face. He had gotten everybody all pepped up about this idea. So there I was. I was trying to be as polite as I could. I outlined the whole same story. And Mr. Maentz was appointed by Mr. Bosman to be chairman of the group to work with me. "Well," they said, "you've got to go to the Netherlands. You've got to find out."

I said well, I didn't think I could go to the Netherlands because at the time the Netherlands was having difficulty on the West Irian, the West Guinea, in the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch were still -- the West Irian people wanted the Dutch to retain control, and the rest of Indonesia had already been made independent. As a result we were dealing with a lot of press stories and so on. So I said, "I can't do that. I can't leave now. Anyway, it wouldn't be much use just to come. I'll start to write some letters." I wrote to some of my colleagues there, and all of them said the same thing: the regulations won't allow that!

Later I was travelling with the Netherlands Ambassador Van Royen and his wife on a trip and was telling them about this idea. And Ambassador Van Royen said, "Oh, you're dead right, Bill. That's absolutely impossible."

But his wife said, "No, Herman (she called him by his first name). Phil, you always must keep in mind women, and I'm sure you've discovered this, like your mother, and all women have an extra sense that we men don't possess. And Mrs. Van Royen said, "No. You know, Herman, you should help Bill. And you should let Bill have some time off to go and maybe he can sell them on the idea. After all, Holland, Michigan is a very important community, settled by the Dutch, the first Dutch community in Michigan and all this, you know."

Anyway, to make this story shorter, I thought, which of my colleagues over there that I've worked with has a lot of ingenuity? Who can I have help me? I thought of Dave Hofmeijer who had worked on immigration matters with me. I got Dave and I talked to Dave. Sure, he'd try to help. Well, we were just as naive as you can imagine. When I got off the plane, he wore a big smile on his face. He'd placed an ad in the popular weekly publication called Elseviers. You know, it

stated something like: American wants to buy a windmill. He had a big grin and he said, "Gosh, Bill, there's no problem. We've received all kinds of calls in my office and at my home. We'll start off and just look at those windmills. We don't have to fuss with the Dutch Windmill Society or anything else."

Well, we started. We spent about four days, tramping inside, up all kinds of windmills, looking all around. And each time the question would come -- we soon learned from the people themselves, that they didn't have a permit to take it down. But they said you can get that. But, here's an American. They thought, a lot of money, you see, and we'll sell our mill. Well, we finally realized that we couldn't do it that way. We realized we had to have a meeting with the Dutch Windmill Society, and we had alienated them, you know, because they had already written me and said "no way". And they didn't care to see me.

*one word* ✓ But, fortunately, on that group, was Ton Koot, an old friend from the famous Rijks Museum, the secretary of the Rijks Museum. And he said, "Gentlemen, if Bill Wichers is here, he's here on a legitimate mission. He's a long time friend of mine, and I simply would recommend that at least we give him an audience."

As a result they set up a luncheon meeting. And I came there. I thought how am I going to deal with this group? They're so hostile especially by now that we went around them or tried to. I knew that I had one man there that would help and that was Ton Koot. I said, "Gentlemen," I said, "I want to fully apologize." I told them why I was there, what the story was and said, "We want to help you with your work. We too are interested in restoring a windmill. The only thing is, we want to restore it in Holland, Michigan." (laughter)



And then they took an action, directing the president, Mr. Stokhuijzen, a wonderful man, and Mr. Koot, and a couple others to meet with me. Finally Mr. de Koning, who was the technical advisor to the Windmill Society, became involved, and we went from there, and they had mills on a list. They knew precisely which mills they would permit by all the criteria to be removed. We looked at a number of them, but finally they took me to Mr. Van Schaijk, a very fine old gentleman, who lived in this town of Vinkel which is in central-south Holland and near the town of s-Hertogenbosch. The reason that mill was on the list came about is that Vinkel was an old Roman town, and strangely enough it was still like a piece of pie. There were three jurisdictions; three municipal jurisdictions for this one town. It had just emerged that way as it grew. They had been talking about this mill which was in one of the areas. And the other two sections felt the money to do the restoration should come from the people in this one area and not the whole town. Finally, I guess, they had reached sort of an impasse. This mill was very old. It preceded our American Declaration of Independence, 1776. It stood originally in the Zaan district which was the industrial heart of the Netherlands before the industrial revolution. And when the industrial revolution came and steam power utilized, these mills were doing everything, cutting lumber, making paper and much more. As they adapted to steam power; you know there are more efficient ways to cut lumber than by wind. So this mill was one of those that was taken down, taken across the Zuider Zee in the winter when it was frozen, then overland and re-erected in this little town. It was badly damaged during World War II. It was in the path of the Allied invasion. There was heavy fighting in this area. And that's why the wings have some shrapnel which we now feature. That's how it was acquired.

After the Windmill Association agreed to our plan, we had to have permission of the Monument Division of the Ministry of Education, the Department of Monuments. They fortunately approved the plan after we went through all those formalities. Then Mr. de Koning, the technical advisor, supervised dismantling the mill's structure, deciding which parts to send. We used the millwright, Mr. Medendorp, who was recommended by the Dutch Windmill Society as the man with the technique, and he is the man we brought here as well.

We were as equally naive on this side of the Atlantic when we were talking in the committee, where we would put the mill. We had ideas: like place it in Centennial Park, put it at Kollen Park. There were all kinds of ideas where to put it. And it wasn't until Mr. de Koning came, and we surveyed the whole area by air first of all, studied maps, toured the ground. And he suggested the site so it would have an uninterrupted windsweep coming down from the lake, over the river there. This is when the concept of Windmill Island was advanced.

Next we had all the problems of how to finance it, the whole development. That was done finally when we sold a half million dollars of revenue bonds. And that, too, is an interesting story, Phil, because city council really was very wary. This was not a very popular idea initially. People didn't think it would go and that it was not financially feasible. The city council said at the outset there could be no tax money spent on that project. So we at the time, it was during the Kennedy Administration, and there were federal funds available if the unemployment reached a figure in a county of -- I think it was nine or eight percent -- and then work projects of this kind would qualify. So we got all the blueprints together, went through all of the whole procedure, the whole turmoil of getting our project

through the Chicago office. It passed there and cleared the next hurdle. It was in Washington and then, well on its way for approval, when the next check of unemployment showed that Ottawa County had improved so much that we no longer qualified.

I had had some experience on serving on the Michigan Historical Commission and we worked on a museum project at Mackinac Island. The Mackinac Island museum was one of the first revenue bond financed projects in Michigan. That was handled by a firm in Chicago. And we went to see them, and Mr. Maentz, being the banker, of course, knew their language. We had a very good reception, and they were looking into it and did approve the idea. The bankers had had the experience of Mackinac Island. We had a feasibility study made by a professor at Michigan State University and had all that done. Then finally we convinced the council to at least -- not to obligate them -- but to at least be the agency that would guarantee the full faith and credit of the city. In that way we got a much lower rate of interest. And, as you know, we've always operated in the black and have been very successful.

Then in 1965, we had Michigan Governor Romney and Prince Bernhard come. We had a great dedication ceremony.

Interviewer: Could you outline the steps for the formation of the Netherlands Museum?

Mr. Wichers: Happily, Phil. One of the objectives of the Netherlands Pioneer and Historical Foundation which was organized in 1937, was a historical display and, ultimately, the organization of a museum. We held on the occasion of the 90th

Anniversary a historical display which occupied the entire basement area on the south side of the basement of Dimnent Chapel. This was done by volunteer committees. This proved so popular that the Chamber of Commerce and the city encouraged us to move it and have it for Tulip Time and the summer and to really think seriously then of our objective of making it permanent.

We then did that, moved into the old Peoples' State Bank building, which had been closed, full of cobwebs, dirty. We cleaned it up, got it lighted up, moved in there, were there and expanded the exhibit only to find that the building was sold. We then repeated the process; the old Masonic Temple building just now on Tenth Street, that building. The Masons had lost it. And we did the same thing there. It was a mess. We cleaned it up with volunteer help, moved the museum in there and then repeated the process when that was opened up, cleaned up, and as people came in it they saw opportunities for that building, and that building then sold.

The Museum Board, the committee, then came to city council and said what do you wish us to do? And city council said at the time the old hospital is standing empty, why don't you move in there? Well, that, too, had been used as our city's first hospital and subsequently, when they built the new hospital in 1923, it had been a college fraternity house, and it had been left in a bad shape. We got a WPA project at the time. The building was completely rewired, replastered, a new roof put on, new plumbing, and new floor; the floor in the basement was a dirt floor. And the council said this is only temporary, until we find something better for you. Well, let's see, that was in 1940 when we moved in, and that "temporary quarters" is still the home of the Netherlands Museum. Short enough?

Interviewer: Short enough. I'd like to thank you for this. This has been a good

interview.

Page 24

# INDEX

Bagby, Scott.....	10
"The Banner".....	6
Bosman, Nelson.....	17
Brown, Carter.....	15,16,17
Calvin College.....	8
Centennial Commission.....	3,4
Century of Progress Exposition.....	2
Chamber of Commerce.....	12,23
Citizens Annexation Advisory Committee.....	13
Citizens for a United Community.....	13
de Koning, Mr.....	21
De Koster, Lester.....	6
Diekema, Gerrit J.....	2
Dimnent Chapel.....	6,23
<u>Dutch Memoirs and Immigrant Writings</u> .....	6
Dutch Windmill Society.....	19,20,21
<u>Elseviers</u> .....	18
Geerlings, Henry.....	6
Grand Rapids.....	8,10
Hague Residency Orchestra.....	8
HEDCOR.....	12
Hofmeijer, Dave.....	18,19
Hope College.....	1,2,8,9
Jalving, Clarence.....	13
Kleinheksel, Henry.....	14
Kollen, President.....	1,2

Koot, Ton.....	19,20
Leiden University.....	7
Lucas, Henry.....	5
Lugers, James.....	14
Mackinac Island.....	22
Madurodam.....	8
Maentz, Henry.....	17,22
Masonic Temple Building.....	23
Michigan Historical Commission.....	22
Ministry of Foreign Affairs.....	3
Netherlands Chamber Orchestra.....	17
<u>Netherlanders in America</u> .....	6
Netherlands Museum.....	22,23
Netherlands Pioneer and Historical Foundation.....	4,22
Opium Conference.....	2
Peoples' State Bank.....	23
Planning Commission.....	9,10,11,12,13
Prince Bernhard.....	2,3,22
Prince Claus.....	3,9
Princess Juliana.....	2
Queen Beatrix.....	9
Princess Margriet.....	3,7
Queen Wilhelmina.....	1
Rijks Museum.....	19
Romney, Governor.....	22
Roosevelt, President Theodore.....	2
Smith, Richard.....	9
Steffens, Ben.....	6

Stockhuzen, Mr.....	20
Vander Haar, Walter.....	14
Van Raalte.....	1,4
Van Royen, Herman.....	18
Van Schaijk, Mr.....	20
Van Vollenhoven, Peter.....	3,7
Vinkel.....	20
Visscher, Robert.....	14
Wichers, Dr.....	2
Wichers, Nell.....	17
Windmill Island.....	14,21
Women's Garden Club.....	8
Wooden Shoe Factory.....	15
Zuider Zee.....	20