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Wells, Hollis C Oral History Interview (African-American): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Hollis C. Wells

Conducted July 25, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The African-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: I will ask you a list of questions that I will ask everyone I interview. You can feel free to talk about them as much as you like. This is Donna Rottier. The date is Monday, July 25, 1994, and I am interviewing Hollie Wells in his home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

HW: Hollis C. Wells.

DR: Thank-you, and your current address?

HW: 13761 New Holland Street, Holland, Michigan.

DR: And your date and place of birth?

HW: [date removed], 1914. Philadelphia, Mississippi.

DR: Thanks. How long has your family lived in Holland?

HW: Roughly about fifty years.

DR: Could you begin, then, by describing a bit about growing up in Mississippi and your life before you moved to Holland?

HW: I didn't grow up in Mississippi. My people left there when I was two years old. I grew up in Arkansas, Missouri, and Chicago, Illinois. I left Chicago and came to Michigan in 1943. I didn't stay in Michigan, however. During World War II, I went out to the state of Washington to work for Kaiser Shipyards, and from

there to California. When the war was over, I came back to Chicago. I couldn't find any place to live, so I came back here on the farm. That was in 1947.

DR: What did your family do?

HW: My parents lived in Missouri. My mother passed away first, and then my father.

DR: How old were you when you moved into Holland?

HW: Thirty-five, I guess, about thirty-five.

DR: Did you go to school in Missouri or Chicago?

HW: In Missouri mostly, yes.

DR: How much school did you have there?

HW: Just out of high school.

DR: What was your first job out of high school?

HW: You'd be surprised. I was a night porter at Dumez Restaurant in Chicago.

DR: How long did you do that?

HW: Until the war started, then I got a better job. I worked at the shipyards. First of all I had to learn to weld. I went to school and learned how to weld. Then I went to work at the Pullman Shipyard in Chicago. No, first I went to work at Jones' Car Manufacturing in Gary, Indiana. I worked there for a few months. Then they closed down, and I went to work for Pullman

Shipyards in Chicago. I worked there for about a little over a year, and then I went out to the state of Washington where I worked for Kaiser. Then to California and I worked there until the war was over. Then I came back to Chicago, and from Chicago back here.

DR: Did you have family or people you knew up here before you moved here?

HW: Yes, I had a family. My wife at that time said she couldn't take this kind of a living. She was born and raised in Chicago and she couldn't take it. She went back to Chicago.

DR: When were you married?

HW: In the war I married the mother of my two sons. Ray lives here on 136th and David lives in Grand Rapids. I was married to her about twenty-two years, then she kicked me out. I built this house here and then the girls' mother and I got married in 1972. When my wife left, I got a job with General Motors in Grand Rapids, at the stamping plant. I worked there for twenty-six-and-a-half years, driving back and forth. In the meantime, I cleared the land and I planted blueberries. I worked at that twelve or fifteen years while I was

still working at General Motors. When I came out, retired, I put full-time into blueberries. It was hard work, but it paid pretty good.

DR: Do you still do that?

HW: No, I sold that in 1982. Now I guess I would consider myself retired.

DR: What sorts of things have you done since you retired?

HW: Interesting things?

DR: Anything. Are you involved in any community organizations or activities?

HW: The church.

DR: What church do you go to?

HW: Calvary Baptist.

DR: How long have you gone there?

HW: Thirteen, fourteen years.

DR: Did you go to another church before you started going to Calvary Baptist?

HW: While I was working in Grand Rapids, I attended a church there. After I quit work there, I said there was no point in me driving all the way to Grand Rapids for church. I associated myself with Calvary Baptist in Holland.

DR: Were you raised in a Baptist church?

HW: Yes. My father was a Baptist minister.

DR: What do you think of Holland as a community?

HW: Now, or then?

DR: Both. First then, when you came here.

HW: It wasn't much. Everywhere that is community living now in shops and businesses was all farmland. I bet there weren't a dozen buildings on 136th between here and Holland when I came here. I've seen a lot in development for businesses. They kind of like being here. The only job which was available to me was the tannery which has been replaced by this chemical facility on River Avenue, right on the Black River. The Black River comes into Holland and it turns into Lake Macatawa. Right on Lake Macatawa, Parke-Davis. There was a tannery there originally and I could have worked there, but I didn't feel I could take that kind of work. I looked in Grand Rapids and got a job at General Motors. Other than that there was no work for me in Holland. That's why I went to Grand Rapids to seek employment.

DR: Why was there no work available? Was it hard to find work for everyone?

HW: There was work here, but none that was appealing to me.

It was usually rough work with low salaries. I looked for something a little better. I drove all the way to Grand Rapids all alone twenty-six years.

DR: What do you think of Holland now as a community?

HW: It's beginning to look like a community now, with all the new businesses that have come in here. Of course, now, with the new business, you draw in another element. The people who commit crimes, they come right on in with the business. It's better in one respect and it's worse in another.

DR: What do you think can be done about that?

HW: I don't think we can actually do anything because the Bible says that man will get worse and worse and worse.

The way I feel about it, there's nothing we can do about it. The Lord Himself will have to deal with that when He comes.

DR: Do you think that it is getting worse in Holland?

HW: Oh yes.

DR: In what sorts of ways do you see that?

HW: I think I remember when the first murder was committed in Holland. I believe that must have been back in the late forties. I don't remember the incident. I just remember they said it was the first murder. I might

have that wrong, but as I understand, it was the first murder committed in Holland. It might have been over a period of time, or it might be the first ever. I don't know which it was.

DR: Have your children gone to school in Holland?

HW: Yes.

DR: What do you think about the education they have gotten here?

HW: My two sons, they finished at Holland West Ottawa. My youngest son, he's in business for himself. He has a repair shop, repairing automobiles. He does very well at that. My next son, he lives in Grand Rapids and I don't know just what he works at.

DR: How do you think your children's lives have been different living in Holland than they would have been had you raised them somewhere else?

HW: Holland has a better influence on them, I believe, than if they had been raised in Chicago. At that time, they were shielded from a lot of the wrong environments had they been in the city. Like I said, I think they were fortunate to be brought up in a community like this.

DR: What do you feel about Holland's image as being a traditional Dutch community?

HW: The image of Holland has changed so much since I came here, it's hard for me to keep up with it. So far, when you know the history of the Dutch people, then you can understand most of their actions. Most of the things they do are from tradition.

DR: Do you think Holland is still a Dutch community?

HW: Yes. It's changed, but slowly.

DR: Is that change good, bad?

HW: Some good, some bad.

DR: What would be some of the good aspects?

HW: Well, in their way, they're very religious. I wouldn't say I approve of all their actions, even toward religion, because they say there is none right but the Dutch. And you know that isn't true. A lot of them, they have slowly changed that attitude. They don't think as much that way as they did two years ago. The community, I think, as a whole it stands for most of the right things. They still have those prejudices, that in most communities you have to learn to look beyond that.

DR: What sorts of prejudices, for example?

HW: They have racial prejudice.

DR: Have you ever felt discrimination or prejudice against

yourself in any way?

HW: Oh yes.

DR: In what circumstances?

HW: I remember one time, I stopped by the Mercury place in Grand Rapids to have some work done on my car. I left, and one of the workers there was going with me. He was going to take me home and bring the car back to do the repair on it. A Mexican couple was driving just from one side of the street to the other. I finally turned around, and in doing so, in his zig-zagging, he hit the rear-end of my car. We stopped, talked about it, called the police. The police, I don't know why he would take their side, because I had a witness to verify the way this man was driving, but he sent me away. Afterwards I got a ticket in the mail. I don't know. I never did anything about it because I knew it was useless to try to justify myself, because I couldn't justify myself to the police even though I had a witness. That is just one incident. Of course I know there had to be others, but that one is always vivid in my mind because it was so unjustified.

DR: Why do you think people act that way?

HW: That's a good question. I guess it's part of their

bringing up, part of their heritage.

DR: How has that kind of discrimination or other kinds of discrimination affected your family?

HW: We have learned to be hardened to that kind of action, try to live above it.

DR: Do you think that you come across any different amount of discrimination living in Holland than you would anywhere else?

HW: No, I doubt it. In some cases Holland is more open to that than other places might be.

DR: How so?

HW: It's in their nature, I guess. They being who they are, think that nobody's right but the Dutch.

DR: What do you think about the growing diversity in Holland? For example, there are more and more Asian people moving into Holland and more and more hispanic people moving into Holland.

HW: I think it's good and bad. When the crowds move in, there's all kind of people as well. When the blacks moved to Holland, came to Holland, more people, they had to get people whoever they could and they didn't know who they were getting, who they were bringing in. So they would bring in the undesirables with the other

folks. You can't charge this to who brought them in there. They had to have people to work, and they didn't know exactly who they were getting.

DR: What do you think that sort of diversity means for Holland as far as the community goes?

HW: How does this element of people affect Holland? I couldn't say it was for the good; it would have to be a negative effect, because this element of people they do nobody good, not even themselves.

DR: Why is that?

HW: I can't say why, I guess. I haven't had the experience of dealing with them that much. Why they do these things, I can't say. Who can say why a person would deliberately murder another? There's no reason at all. I can't understand it.

DR: When you came to Holland in the forties, how much ethnic diversity was there then?

HW: They treat you right on the surface, but they might have other intentions beneath.

DR: When you moved into Holland, how many other African-Americans were living in Holland?

HW: None, that I knew of.

DR: How many are living here now, do you have an idea?

HW: Now? I have no idea. You might wonder how I happened to chose this place to live. When you live in Chicago, it's a big thing at that time to have a farm in Michigan. Our original result was Ohio. I went there lots of weekends. On the weekend, a lady was wanting a ride back to Chicago. We were talking about farms and what-not. She said, "I know where you can get one." She said, this man, in Holland, he's married to a black woman, and she was discontent because there were no black people around. If he would sell part of the farm to some black person, she would be more content to live there. I talked to the gentleman. He said, yes, he would like to sell. We closed the deal on the farm. His wife never came back to town. I think that was just an excuse for her to get out.

DR: Why have you stayed in Holland for as long as you have?

HW: Well, my roots are all here now. I wouldn't mind leaving Holland, if I knew someplace to move. I could live in a warmer climate. At my age, that would be beneficial to me, but my roots are all here. If I could possibly sell this place for what I figure it's worth, I wouldn't mind leaving Holland. Because at my age, you don't enjoy getting up and wading through the

snow in the cold weather. I feel that my health would be better from that. I have been fairly physically fit, consider I think I am. The climate doesn't seem to hurt me physically, but maybe I would have a better mental attitude if I was to get away from here.

DR: Who did you sell your blueberry farm to?

HW: To a young couple. His father had been in blueberries.

He had died, and I guess that's why he decided someday he had to have a blueberry farm.

DR: How big was your farm?

HW: About thirty acres. You can see it here, all the way back to where you see those trees, that was the end of our farm.

DR: Have you ever regretted selling it, or getting out of the blueberry business?

HW: Oh, no. I'd been in it at least about forty years. That's long enough to stay in most any kind of business, especially when you have to work hard at it.

DR: If you were going to tell people who were going to be reading this interview one thing that they should know about you, what would that be?

HW: I can't exactly say, but one thing that has proven beneficial to me is that when you have a mind to do a

thing, and you feel it in yourself that it's the right thing to do, stick with it, regardless of the circumstances around you. When your mind is made up to do a thing, you let nothing deter you from that goal.

DR: How has that attitude helped you?

HW: I can't put it in so many words, but down through the ages, if I had not had that attitude, I wouldn't have made it I don't believe.

DR: I'm through with my questions. Is there anything else you want to tell me about yourself or you think is important to say?

HW: No, I think we've just about covered everything that's happened to me in Michigan.

DR: Well, then, thank you very much for taking the time to do this.