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Ritsema, Robert Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College

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Joint Archives of Holland
Oral History Project- summer 2000
Retired Hope Professors
Interviewee: Dr. Robert Ritsema
Interviewer: Melissa LaBarge
22 June 2000

ML: Can you tell me where you were born, your education, and how it brought you to Hope?

RR: Well I was born on a farm in Illinois- in a town called Momence, Illinois. Actually, that was my mailing address, but there was a little community called Wichert, which was a Dutch community. I followed my sister; my oldest sister- two sisters actually- came to Hope before me. So it was just sort of natural- when it was time for me to go to college I just sort of came to Hope and never really thought of anywhere else, I think.

ML: That's right, you graduated from Hope?

RR: Right. So I went to a school... as I said living on a farm, it was called Momence, Illinois- my address, but I was in the St. Anne, Illinois, school district. So I went to high school in St. Anne, Illinois, and then came to Hope.

ML: Did you study music at Hope?

RR: I did, right. Actually I had gotten a start earlier than that. There's a school in Kankakee, Illinois, which is again another city right in that area called Olivet Nazarene College. And that's where I sort of started on music before I came to Hope. But then I was a music major at Hope.

ML: What did you do after college?

RR: I went immediately to graduate school at the University of Michigan- got my masters degree in music. So I spent about a year and a half there and then started teaching.

ML: Why did you decide to come to Hope?

RR: Well, as I said it was just sort of a natural part. We were in the Reformed Church. I think my parents really urged it, and it was just kind of a natural thing for me to do. My older sister was the first female from our community to ever go away to college. It was just something you never heard of. And then my other sister came, and I followed her. And then my younger brother also came to Hope- so all four of us came to Hope.

ML: What year did you start teaching?

RR: I started teaching at Hope in 1967. So that was ten years after I graduated.

ML: What was it like when you came here... well, actually since you came here as a student, you have more depth than most people. What was it like when you were here as a student?

RR: Well, of course it was very much different back in those days. First of all, it was so much smaller- college. I think when I was a senior we probably had, maybe a thousand students at most- nine-hundred to a thousand students. I remember room and board and tuition my senior year was near a thousand dollars or less, I think, for the whole thing as well. And, of course, it was the whole mandatory Chapel- every five days a week at eight o'clock in the morning you went. You had penalties for if you missed more than- I think it was three times a semester- then they added hours on to your graduation requirement. Something which they

could never do now anymore. But I had heard about some- of course I didn't have that problem! But I heard about others who did and they would add like three hours on. They would say instead of 126, you'd have to have 129 or something like that. And there were Chapel monitors. I had that position. We were responsible for like three rows in the Chapel and everyday you had to take attendance- it was all assigned seating so they could check up on everybody. But it was sort of a neat thing in a way 'cause it did start your day off. It insured that you were up and ready to go every day at eight o'clock. And then your day just followed after that.

ML: Was there a variety of courses then, a lot of different departments as there is now?

RR: Not nearly as much, no. It was much more restrictive. Of course, I was not really in to that so much. But I think of the areas that have really blossomed since then. Business, for instance- it existed, but it certainly wasn't a prime department as it is now. They have so many majors in there. And things like geology and several other areas- there just weren't anything. It was most basically the English, history, religion, music. The theater department didn't even exist. They did some plays, but there wasn't any real department.

ML: What has changed? Physically, or from the time that you were a student- or came here first- to now. How has it changed?

RR: Well, physically, the campus, of course, has changed a lot. One of the principal things was they tore down old Carnegie Gymnasium where we had our gym classes and so forth- which used to sit on the hill next to what is now this building [Dewitt]. At its time, I guess it was quite a place but by the time I was even- as a

student- it was starting to get run down. And then it was still here when I came back to teach actually. It was not until after I was here for a few years that it was torn down and the new Dow Center was built. So that was a big change. Of course our library, at that time, was what is now Graves Hall. That's changed twice since then. It moved to Van Zoeren and subsequently to Van Wylen, so that was a big difference. The building that has changed the least is the chapel. It's very much the same except back when I was here, that's where the music department existed. There was no music building, so the music department was in the basement of the chapel. And there are big rooms down there where you had your rehearsals and so forth. And my senior year in college, they moved in to the- what is now- Nykerk Hall. And so my senior year I also lived in Kollen Dorm. That was the first year for Kollen Dorm. Before that, there were no men's dormitories at all on campus. All the other years you lived in houses in the community that were approved by the college, and then you were actually assigned to them. Like when I came as a freshman I was told I would be living on East 15th Street with this couple there that had an extra room. So that's how the males were assigned. And, of course, it made for a great disparity between female and male students because the males lived out in these houses and could come and go as they wished. But the females lived in college dorms and were under really strict regulations. You know they couldn't be out past ten at night, and they had to sign out each time they went out and so forth. So it was a very, very uneven way of life for male and female.

ML: I've heard from some other people that the student body used to be more continental- like more from the East coast and West coast than it is now. Do you feel that way?

RR: It was, not so much from the West Coast although we had some from there. But we had a lot more students from the East Coast. But New York and New Jersey, when I was in school and I think maybe even when I first came back to teach. Obviously the greatest percentage of students was always from Michigan, but then after that would always be New York and New Jersey. And that would be the order, which is not the case anymore. They are still here, but of course the proportions are different too. As I said, we had nine hundred some students- now there's twenty-eight hundred, it makes a big difference. But there was a bigger mix, I think, at that time.

ML: Do the different academic departments, the music department for instance- is there a lot of interrelation between the departments, or are they isolated?

RR: I think we always wished that there were more, obviously. But we tried, especially in the last several years, to have a little closer cooperation between... especially the arts departments. With the theater obviously, especially, and with some of the others. So we had some joint programs and some things we did together. But I think that has been always one concern of people over the years that since this was a liberal arts school we should try and mix a little bit more. It never was really a strong thing, I'm afraid, at Hope.

ML: The student manual says that Hope College is a four year liberal arts school in the tradition of the Reformed Church of America. What does that mean to you?

RR: Well, again that has changed a little bit. Obviously, it is not a college of the Reformed Church in that it is governed by the Reformed Church- you know, we have our own board of directors and so forth. But I think the important thing is that mission statement says it presents liberal arts in the context of the historic Christian faith. I think that's been the sort of centering thing over the years. That we've not tried to be exclusive. At least, that's what a number of us have tried to hold to anyway. That we have certain ideals that we've held to that are inherent in the Judeo Christian tradition. But yet, not trying to be exclusive or so apart so that we say, 'No, you are not welcome here at Hope College because you are from another religion, or no religion whatsoever.' But I think the fact that we've held on to the idea of the context of the Christian faith is an important one because it's given us a base on which to build. Character building is a very, very euphemistic phrase, but I think it's really helped shape and mold the lives of a lot of students.

ML: With that, diversity- even religious diversity among professors- do you think that's important?

RR: Well, that, of course, has been one of the really touchy points over the years as I'm sure you know if you've followed that at all. And there are some who feel adamantly that there should be no one other than Christians teaching at the college, and there are others who say that it could be open to anyone, and there is sort of a middle ground. And I guess I've sort of fallen into that middle ground. I think that that's important. I have some friends here, in fact, who have not been professing Christians, but I think their viewpoints have been very valuable to the college over the years.

ML: With other kinds of diversity, ethnic diversity, do you think Hope has gotten more ethnic diverse?

RR: Well, certainly more than when I went to school. I mean, that's what I compare with. And others who have been here for years, and I'd have to agree with them. More in recent years that they say 'well, we're not ethnically diverse or religiously diverse enough.' But I think back to when I was a student and it's pretty hard. And we had some foreign students- some Asian students and sometimes a few from... I can't even remember where they were from. But essentially it was almost purely a Caucasian community. And it was also, essentially, a Reformed Church community. I mean, back in those days the greatest percentage of enrollment was from the Reformed Church. For instance, for a student- a Roman Catholic- to come here was almost unheard of. If they were on campus, they were sort of like an oddity. So in those ways it certainly has changed a lot.

ML: What kind of classes did you teach, and did you direct the orchestra here as well?

RR: Yes. Over my thirty-two years I taught most of every kind of class that you could imagine: you know, music history classes, intro to music classes, courses in conducting and music theory, orchestration. And of course, I taught applied lessons on cello- that's my main instrument. And then I also conducted the orchestra and symphonette. And on a couple occasions, the band as well- when the band director was gone on sabbatical or something so I'd fill in for a semester.

ML: Has there been any students or any opportunities that have just been outstanding over your thirty-two years that stick out in your mind?

RR: Of course we had those wonderful trips with the symphonette every year, we took a tour in the spring. Also, over thirty-two years I've spent a lot of time with students. In fact, I said at my retirement speech- I totaled it up and said I've spent about two years of my life on a bus with the symphonette when you put all those weeks together. So those were great experiences, especially our overseas trips. We went to different places; sometimes we went to Europe and to Australia and New Zealand and so forth. So we've made several trips like that. So those were great experiences. I think, obviously the Christmas Vespers experiences and the DeVos Showcase- which I was, without patting myself on the back, but I was the one who started the DeVos Showcase thing. That's when I was chairman.

ML: How long ago did that start?

RR: Well, it was twelve years, I think. So those were all great experiences. Had a number of really famous and important musicians on campus over the years. You know working with them was great. And then just to see the successes of your students as well. There are students playing in orchestras all around the country and in the world. I have a student who's playing in an orchestra in France, so those are exciting kinds of things too.

ML: How was the symphonette received in Europe and in Australia?

RR: Well, it varies, of course, from where you are. We found that very often if we played in the smaller communities- that's where it was received the best. If we went to the cosmopolitan places, well they've got concerts all the time by the leading orchestras in the world. So they see a sign that says 'Hope College Symphonette is coming'- what does that mean to them? Not at all, but we had

some great experiences, especially places where we had home stays with the local people and so forth. So those were received very well.

ML: I have some questions about the community of Holland. Were you familiar with it before you came?

RR: I really wasn't, except as I said, since my sisters had gone here so I had come up with them a few times. But I really knew nothing at all about Holland, no.

ML: What did you think when you got here?

RR: Well, again, I was straight off the farm so... I can't remember what my initial impressions were. But it was far different than it is now, that's for sure. I mean, for instance, I just think often of those tennis courts over here on the corner of Columbia and 12th Street. They were there when I was in school, but you couldn't play on them on Sunday. There was no tennis playing allowed on Sundays, and you could not find a restaurant in the city of Holland- or a gas station or anything that was open on Sunday. I mean it really closed down. So that was one thing that I remember very plainly. Plus it was a much smaller community- it hadn't nearly the problems that it has now. There was no social unrest or anything. It was very quiet and rural and very clean- extremely clean. And that was one of the great things that Holland people were so proud of. And, of course, the Tulip Festival was already going big at that time.

ML: Do professors, in general at Hope, find their friendships within the community of Holland or within Hope faculty.

RR: I can't speak for everyone, but I think it's a mixture. I mean, you certainly have friends here at the college. But, you know, through church connections and other ways you also have friends in the community. So I think it's some of each.

ML: Do you think the ethnic diversity has helped Holland to change in this way?

RR: I think so. I think it always presents lots of challenges too. But I think that there's just no way Holland was going to remain the way it was back forty or fifty years ago. So I think it has helped, and it's obviously brought its share of problems too.

ML: Where do you see Hope College heading in the future?

RR: Well, that's kind of hard for me to say. I, first of all, should say that I'm a very good friend of Dr. Bultman- the president. He and I, when he taught at Hope, he was my next door neighbor. And before that we had both taught in the same school in Portage when we first started out- I've known him for a long time. So I think that he's a great person to sort of take hold of things at this... I guess I just see the college, first of all, and I would hope this and although it isn't probably gonna grow much in terms of its physical size. And I think that's the wish of the administration and the board as well. So I don't think that will change.

ML: They've capped it, haven't they?

RR: Around 3000, so I always take that with a little grain of salt- I mean I think it could inch up a little bit. But I don't think it's gonna develop into any big university or anything. And I would just hope that it would sort of maintain this kind of principles that it has always had- and that is it's very strong academic basis. That is it really tries to see that things don't get watered down, as you see

sometimes happening in terms of admission or in terms of the standards in the classroom and so forth. So I'm hoping that that's what's going to happen.

Religiously speaking, I don't know what's going to happen. There have been several things happening in the last year- there's been a lot of conflict going on there as well. And it's always hard to take sides. But I guess I've been on the side that I've seen things happening here that I haven't liked too much in the last couple of years. So I'm hoping that that's all going to sort of sort itself out and return to the way I think Hope College always did look at religion in the past.

ML: What would that be?

RR: Well, as I said earlier, it looks at it as a basis on which to build and not as a standpoint to finger point- something to try to isolate and to create divisions and so forth. It's a difficult thing to talk about. Again, I realize that I'm old fashioned, but I was very disappointed in the Chapel services, for instance, that we have two magnificent organs over in the chapel and students graduate now and never get a chance to hear those because it's just not a part of what goes on in the chapel. That's a very small point, but those are the kinds of things I mean by sort of sticking to its roots and its traditions in the past, that's what I would hope.

ML: Has this whole controversy, has that been the biggest one that has ever hit Hope since you've been here?

RR: Well, it certainly ranks up there. There have been periods of ups and downs over my years. With each president, there seems to be one item or one issue that seems to raise its head. So there have been ups and downs. But I have felt, and again this is very personal, that since Dr. Van Wylen- two presidents ago took over- that

the college really started to move ahead. And I felt, in the last couple of years we've had this little dip here- and so I'm hoping that it's gonna go again.

ML: What led to your decision to retire?

RR: I don't know. I just thought that it was probably about time to retire. I can't really point to any one specific thing. I thought... one thing that I was happy to do- I had stopped being chairman of the Music Department a few years ago. The Music Department was sort of at a high at that time, I'm not crediting myself for that, but we just had gotten a number of people in and the department was really moving ahead. And then the orchestra, my last year, was the strongest and best orchestra that I had ever had at Hope College, and I really felt good leaving it to somebody else at that level instead of trying to bail out sometime when things were not good. So I just felt that sort of everything was coming together at the right time for me to retire, even though I could of- I was a couple of years away from being 65, but I just thought it was time.

ML: What are you gonna do with your time now?

RR: Well, I'm still conducting this Youth Orchestra in Kalamazoo, and we're planning a trip to Spain and France next year. And I'm still teaching a few cello lessons and I did teach a course last year at Hope too, although I don't think I'll be teaching any this year. There's just plenty of... I'm teaching a course this fall for HASP- the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals and so forth.

ML: What are you teaching?

RR: In music history, early music.

ML: Really? What are you gonna miss most about Hope?

RR: Well, obviously the thing I miss most are my students and my colleagues. I had such wonderful experiences over the years playing in the faculty chamber recitals, playing with my colleagues and collaborating with them, and those kinds of things I really miss. And then also, obviously, the students. I mean they are what it's all about. So I have so many great memories of the students and the marvelous experiences and the thrill of standing up there at the end of a Vespers or some other concert, and knowing that it's a job well done. I think that's the big thing. But it's been a tremendous thirty-two years plus the four years I was here as a student. And we just had this incredibly close connection with Hope because all four the kids in our family went there. And then, I don't want to go into too much detail here, but my father and his brother married sisters and they were in partnership together on the farm. So our houses were right next to each other. So there were three kids in that family and four in ours, so we were really like seven children because our bloodlines are so closely connected. And we grew up together. We'd work together all day and go to sleep in different houses at night- that was about the difference. But all three of those boys came to Hope as well, so all seven of us from that little community. So it's been a long tradition. And almost all of our children have also all come to Hope. All four of my children came- so there's been a real long connection. I have a grand niece, my sister's granddaughter who is at Hope as a student right now. So the connection is still going on. And then what is even more exciting- I don't know if this will happen. My middle son's wife is just completing a PHD right now in accounting, and she

interviewed for a job here at Hope, so I don't know if that will happen in the future or not. But maybe they'll be another Ritsema on the faculty.

ML: Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

RR: Well... I just think that Hope's been really fortunate, I've said this all along, to have this really great partnership we've mentioned about the city of Holland. Having been around enough places to know what a lot of animosity there is between a lot of schools and the community, that's been a fortunate thing about Hope. That's there's been a really good relationship over the years with the city of Holland and the area. So I think that's been a real blessing to the college too. And, of course, the fact that Hope is right in the middle of the town I think is a great advantage too- to both constituencies. Instead of being out- so many colleges have decided somewhere along the line because they didn't have enough room to expand, they just moved out to the edge of town or something like that. But being right down here, I think is really a neat thing.

ML: Being in the city, for instance with music, has that led to a lot of cooperation between the city and Hope College?

RR: Well, it has, and we are so blessed. People who come here are always so amazed at the crowds we draw for our concerts. And this faithful group that attends here. It's the real rapport built up, I think, with the people of the community. So that's been a real great thing not only with our department, but for the other arts departments as well.

ML: I have another question I forgot to ask, it's about committees. How much of your time was taken up by that?

RR: A lot. When people ask me about how am I enjoying my retirement, that's usually one of the first things I mention. Now the nice part is that I can sort of come and go and do things that I want to, but I don't have to go to any committee meetings or anything like that. And I realize that's a necessary part, but over the years I served on, I guess, every committee you can imagine at the college, and it does take a lot of your time. But it's expected of you as a part of your job, as well as advising and so forth. That's being a part of an undergraduate school I think. But it can be draining, especially when you're on some of the committees that meet frequently and have important decisions to make. But a lot of them I've enjoyed. For instance, for eighteen years I was the faculty representative to the MIAA. So I was chair of that group several times, and I got to be the chair of the committee to select a new commissioner and those kind of things. So I had a lot of things I enjoyed too. I don't know if you knew this, but I was also captain of the basketball team when I was at Hope College years ago. Which is kind of, I think, a great thing for a small school. You could be a music major and still be in sports.

ML: Do you still go to the games?

RR: Oh, yeah.

ML: How did your team do when you were playing?

RR: We were champions of the league. My senior year, I should say, we were champions. And I again, take very little credit for that because we had a great team roster 'cause then the succeeding three years they won it again. So they won it four years in a row, and the first time was my senior year.