Bruggink, Donald Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Donald Bruggink

Conducted July 24, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
AP: The first thing I have everyone do is state their name, and where and when they were born.

DB: Donald J. Bruggink, born in Kalamazoo, Michigan [date removed], 1929.

AP: Did you grow up in Kalamazoo?

DB: No, after three years, my parents moved back to Wisconsin to the Sheboygan County area where they both originated. I lived there until it was time to go to college.

Then I went to Central in Pella, Iowa and came to Western Seminary for my theological education.

AP: How was that making the choice for you of going from college to seminary? Did you pretty much know that was what you were going to do?

DB: No, I went to college with the intention of becoming an architect, for which, I suppose, Central was a very poor choice. But I was sort of brought there by a church connection and by the Central College recruiter, who was Gerrit Van Roekel, who subsequently became my father-in-law. It’s still a family dispute as to whether he was happy or unhappy about that turn of events. (laughs) But at Central College I fell in with a group of sinister pre-seminarians and sort of moved in the direction of theology rather than architecture as a vocation.

AP: Were you married before you came to seminary or after?

DB: No, I was married between my junior and senior year of seminary.
AP: Was that real common? Were most people in seminary at that time married or not married?

DB: At that time, I couldn’t give you exact percentages, but it seems it varied between 2/5 and 3/5 were married or unmarried depending upon the class and the year.

AP: So that would have been in the...

DB: Early 1950s. It was probably ’54 that I graduated from seminary.

AP: Then did you have a parish right away?

DB: No, I continued on and did a doctoral degree at the University of Edinburgh, and the took a pastorate in the Bronx in New York, where my education really began. Up until that time, I had always lived in very homogeneous communities, both ethnically and religiously, moving from Cedar Grove to Pella to Holland and even Edinburgh. Edinburgh was simply a switch. You changed from Dutch to scots and from Dutch Reformed to Scottish Presbyterians. But when you moved to the Bronx, suddenly Protestants were a small minority, like 5% in our area. It was multi-cultural America. That was a whole new experience.

AP: So when you first came to Holland, it wasn’t a big switch for you at all?

DB: No, Holland was just more the same, but bigger. And Edinburgh was more of the same, but bigger still. The Bronx was bigger still, and totally different.

AP: What things were most different for you?

DB: The size was a totally new dimension. Just being in the minority, as I said, Protestants were about 5% in our particular area in the Bronx. Catholics composed 60% of the population. People of Jewish ancestry were 35%. The other 5% were
pagans or Protestants. People were of every possible racial background.

AP: In your congregation, too?

DB: Racially, we were sort of in the bridge of the integration bit. While we were there, we took in our first black families, had a few Asians worshipping with us, had one couple of Greek ancestry ethnically, but Egyptian nationally. We also had some Indian people worshipping with us. Subsequently in the movement of populations, that area of the Bronx became, first, it had a heavy mixture of black, then a heavy mixture of third world, and then became very heavily Hispanic, which it still is. It's heavily Hispanic with a minority of blacks, and a smaller minority of caucasians.

AP: So you would have come to the Bronx in the early 60s?

DB: No, that would have been '57 to '61 or '62. My wife always keeps the exact dates straight. I'm lucky to hit within a year of the actual date.

AP: Where did you go from there?

DB: I had a chance to become a Sabbatical replacement for Dr. Osterhaven. So I did that for a year. Then after that, Dr. Edingburg was switched to Christian ethics, so I was invited to take the chair or church history, which I did. It was essentially taught as church history then, but the official name of the chair was historical theology. Ultimately I moved to teaching specifically historical theology and the development of the doctrine, which I'm still doing.

AP: So each person working here has their own little…?

DB: Nitch. Yes. We're divided into three fields. The Biblical field, theological field, and Christian ministry field. John Hesslink does systematic theology, I do historical
theology, and Chris Keiser, who’s the bridge person, teaches courses in both fields, although he’s primarily a historical theologian.

AP: How did your transition go coming back from the Bronx?

DB: The first several years we were here, we went back to the Bronx just as often as we could and spent our summers there as well. The first thing one noticed in coming back to Holland, Michigan, is the houses were so far apart. In our section of the Bronx, there was a curb, then the sidewalk, and the apartment buildings went up for a minimum of six stories. That went to the end of the block, turn the corner, and there was more of the same. In sixteen blocks, there were 16,000 people living. So here, instead of having a few scraggly trees planted in the sidewalk by the side of the road, there was all this luxurious foliage all over the place, and houses set at great distances from one another, that was something of a shock, as was the absolute quiet at night. By about 9:00, everything seemed to have just become totally quiescent. The first year we lived across the street in rental housing, and this part of town was very, very quiet in the early 60s at night. Much more quiet, I suspect, than it is today.

AP: So did you think that was great, or hard to adjust to, or just different?

DB: It was different. I was too busy to worry about things like that one way or the other. In those days, in my first year here, I taught nine different courses as a Sabbatical replacement for Dr. Osterhaven, of which only one had been previously prepared that I had taught at New Brunswick Seminary as an adjunct. The second year, I had nine different new courses to teach.

AP: That’s a lot of prep work.
DB: Yes. That’s not a good way to start a career. (laughs) One sort of marvels at the
graciousness with which new faculty are treated today, with one new preparation per
term. It seems like the utmost kindness compared to doing three for six successive
terms. It was a rugged beginning. But over the years, I’ve taught all sorts of course,
and it’s always been fun. We’ve gone through all sorts of curricular changes over the
years, some of which have been successful, and some of which haven’t. But it’s a
great place to work. It’s always fun. In terms of students, discipline problems are
virtually non-existent. Attention and interest is high. The students are wonderful.
It’s a really wonderful vocation.

AP: How has the seminary changed?

DB: The biggest change has been the increase in second career people, and the increase in
the number of women. In my first years here, the classes were probably 85-90%
males straight out of college. The first female taking classes was a Chinese woman,
Elsie Law, who was taking classes with her husband. Then a few women started to
come into the seminary for a degree in religious education. Then, probably in the
early 70s, you began to get a few women who were studying for the MDiv., even
though ordination was not yet a possibility in the church. With the general synod
affirming the ordination of women, the numbers of women in the seminary greatly
increased, as did the number of second career women, who came into the seminary
for their master of divinity and ordination. It’s been the experience, not only here,
but of a lot of my peers with whom I work on Faith and Order who have had the
same experiences in their seminaries, that teaching has become much more
interesting, in some ways both easier and more challenging. The second career
students are there at considerable sacrifice, they're there with a high degree of
intentionality, and are willing to work, and do work, which is in marked contrast with
the one college student who confided, "You have to realize that any assignment is too
much." Which was sort of the attitude in the very early days. Any demands were
too much. Students always tried to decrease the work load, rather than expand it.
Second career people just sort of dug into whatever you gave them and did it happily
and did it well. Teaching has become more fun rather than less fun over the years.

AP: Has the size of the seminary changed a lot?

DB: The size of the seminary has changed primarily in terms of the number of programs.
When I came the Mdiv was called a bachelor of divinity. For a time, with the
presidency of Harold Englund, he was an extremely attractive speaker with lots of
contacts, and the students who were for the BD, later the Mdiv degree, sort of hit a
high point then, at somewhere between 30 and 35 students per class. Then that began
to sag. It always stayed somewhere in the twenties. But the only other program at
that time, when I came here in '62, was a master of sacred theology, ThM. But there
were very few students in that program, maybe one or two a year. Then the masters
of religious education was added. Then sometime in the 80s, the doctor of ministry
degree was added. In the late 80s or early 90s, the ThM, the masters of theology,
was revivified to become a degree primarily for foreign nationals, students from other
countries, some of whom were simply seeking an advanced degree that they could
Teach in their own seminaries, some of whom were doing it in preparation for going
on to a doctoral degree in a major American University. Western was a nice bridge institution, because most of these students primarily came out of India, Indonesia, the Pacific rim, including the Philippines, Japan, and Korea, also South Africa, primarily black South Africans. I think this year we're going to have our first white South African student, which will be something of a change. But Western was a nice transitional institution, because in most of these countries, with the exception of South Africa and the Philippines, Christians were in the minority, and were very committed to a rather straightforward biblical faith, and were ill-prepared for the cold bath of many of the secularized universities that offered doctoral degrees, and required western ways of approaching academic subject matter. Here at Western, where they were sort of embraced with a warm biblical faith, they could also begin to get a handle on western ways of academia without feeling that their faith was also threatened. For example, several years ago, I had one very, very intelligent Chinese woman from Singapore. But in her courses, she never came to a conclusion. The ethos of her nationality was, you respect your elders, and you don't contradict your elders. Of course, if you expressed an opinion after citing the evidence, then you would be contradicting some of your elders while agreeing with others, and you just didn't do that. So her papers would always be these wonderful, pertinent citations of, on the one hand, but on the other... But there was never any conclusion as to what she thought and why. So within the courses that I was teaching, I would keep insisting, "Irene, you've got to come to a conclusion if you're going to do doctoral studies. This is not going to cut it. I know that in your society, you do not
contradict your elders, but here you’re going to have to learn to make a choice if you really want a doctorate. You’re not going to get a doctorate if you can’t learn to do that.” So gradually she edged out of that social understanding that had been a part of her upbringing and learned to express her own opinions. That, I think, was nice, clear cut example of how Western is a very warm, embracing institution to help students. Later she went to Boston University for her doctorate, and there she found a very different form of academic environment, but one for which she was at least somewhat prepared. Whereas, if she had gone directly from Singapore to Boston, I think it would have been very destructive.

In past years, where we’ve only had 25 to 30 MDiv students in each class, we’ve had 150 student on the roles, by virtue of these other programs. And by virtue of the fact that with second career people, many are not full-time students, but are only here for a few sources per year. But more recently within these past two years, we’ve had a significant upsurge in student enrollment, and we’ll probably hit at least 35 Mdiv students again this year, as we did last year.

AP: I see they’re adding a new row of housing out there, too.

DB: Even those are not adequate, yet. They’re all spoken for, including the new ones. In fact, some of the students who were here last year still can’t get in, even though they’ve had their names in. But the housing that we do have has contributed a lot to the seminary community, it’s really the core. It’s been a very positive factor in the seminary environment.

AP: I heard that it is a big change from the housing they used to have?
Those houses all went up either before or just after World War I. It's one thing to have a fixer upper in the hands of a person who is handy with tools and who has bought it and has a commitment to keep it up. It's something else to have it in the hands of seminarians whose primary objective is studying, and who come into a dilapidated house to which they have no commitment other than getting out as soon as possible. The result is that it was just a terrible uphill battle to keep them livable.

Let's talk a bit about the city, then, and maybe how the city has changed.

When I came in the early 60s, integration was a big issue in the nation. It was something toward which we were working in the Bronx in the church in which I served, and were beginning to accomplish it with a fair degree of success. I think our second black family had a young woman who came to Hope for several years. In Holland, at the time, there were no black families living. There were black students at Hope, and here at Western, but that was different than having families who posed the "threat" of permanent residence. Some of the professors at the college, with the support of some of the churches, were working toward integration in Holland, and supporting open housing, and were vigorously engaged in finding houses for black families that wished to enter the community. Hope College, playing its usual avant garde social role, albeit with resistance, both within and without, hired the Reverend Sam Williams as college chaplain, who was a black and had a black wife and, quite naturally, black children. They were readily accepted by the college and by Third Church, where they became members. I can remember having Sam's brilliant, young daughter in Sunday School while I was teaching there. They were very graciously
accepted. That was not new to Third Church. In fact, way back in the 19th Century, I forget just which decade, I suspect it was probably in the 80s, although it may have been as early as the 70s, Hope College welcomed Japanese students from our mission in Japan, and these students, as well, were welcomed in Third Church. Probably Hope Church, too, but I'm a member of Third, and don't know Hope's history as well. Whenever there have been Japanese students around, they have continued to be members of Third Church. Even now, we have Professor Ito and his wife worshipping at Third Church. Professor Ito did his ThM with us years ago, and is now a professor in Tokyo, and has come back to do some advance research. We've already had a long history with one racial group. I think Sam William was a graduate from Western, and probably worshipped at Third when he was a student here. But gradually over the years, the black population in Holland has increased. When you see something from the very beginning, within a rather brief expanse of 35 years, it's interesting to see. The Hispanic community had already begun when we came back. In fact, the Hispanic community had already begun when I was a student here, mainly as a result of World War II, when places like Heinz desperately needed labor and kept migrant workers from the field to work year around. Really, the settled Hispanic community began with World War II, and has continued ever since.

Very obviously, with those changes, it was becoming less and less Dutch. I think it was the Westinghouse Plant, and I'm not sure when that began, I think it was in the 50s, that Westinghouse resulted in a rather large influx of non-Dutch, white Americans, many in the professional classes. There were a number of interesting
stories making the rounds when we were first here, usually told by people of Dutch ancestry on themselves. I remember Barbara Lampen, who’s still alive, and lives over at Freedom Village, who taught history for decades in Holland Public High. One of her favorite stories was about when they were talking about the history of the Jews, and one of the students raised their hand, and said they understood about Reformed, and Christian Reformed, but they’d like a bit more explanation of how the Jews fit into this. Of course, in the Cropwalk, up to a few years ago, they still labeled it, Reformed, Christian Reformed, and Other, encompassing all others: Presbyterians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Baptists, and all other. Another story is told of people of Irish ancestry, professional people who had moved into the community. This was in the early 60s. The Dutch who were meeting them socially were having difficulty with the name, just had a terrible time, and finally said, that was just such a strange name, they couldn’t pronounce it. So these people, of Irish ancestry asked what their name was. It was Michmerhuizen. Still another story that was told socially was, a couple was introduced at a party and asked whether they had lived in Holland a long time, and they replied, ”No, they were new comers, they had only been here 17 years.” All of which points to the fact that in the 60s, Holland still considered itself a Dutch community with a few interlopers. Over the years, that has changed, first with a modest influx of blacks, a continuing influx of Hispanics. Then the Cuban crisis came. Then with the Vietnamese War and its ending, the influx of southeast Asians. Holland has become much more reflective of an American society as a whole than it was 35 years ago. Physically, Holland has grown. The
tremendous success of the office furniture industries, with Herman Miller and Haworth, which has expanded tremendously. It’s the second or third largest office furniture manufacturer in the nation. Then the tremendous success of the Prince Corporation. All three, I think, in varying degrees, build on the success of a Dutch work ethic, combined with a gentle paternalism on the part of management. I think Herman Miller pioneered the way, along with Donnelly, in terms of participatory management on the part of the workers, both using variants of the Scanlon plan of worker participation. I think the Prince Corporation—it’s always impressed me that Prince had a gentle paternalism which expected hard work, but did an awful lot for the community. But the combination of this management genius and good Dutch work ethic, which obviously rubbed off on others coming in to the community, has resulted in the success of these industries and has kept this area of Michigan humming while other parts of the state are still in economic doldrums. Of course, that’s brought this large number of smaller industries that have been successful and has resulted in tremendous expansion of the community.

AP: Has the role of women in Holland changed, and how?

DB: Of course I’m most familiar with the situation right here in the seminary. When I came to the seminary, at the same time, the first woman professor had been hired to teach Christian education, which was sort of the usual domain of women in those days in seminary education, not only at Western, but throughout the country. It was very interesting to see how many of my male colleagues, most of whom I had had as professors while I was a student here and whom I greatly respected, it was interesting
how very difficult they found it to listen to the contributions of a female colleague during a faculty meeting. Elaine would say something, and the next male speaker would reply to what the male speaker had said before Elaine had spoken. My wife, who was the first married woman elder of Third Church’s consistory found the same thing happening to her. About a decade later when she was representing the General Program Council of the denomination and went out fund raising with a male colleague, they went in pairs to approach church consistories for this mammoth fund raising drive, she again had this same experience of, she could talk, but the replies were always directed to the male member of the team.

AP: Was that done with malice, or without them thinking of it?

DB: I think the latter. Once in a while one would suspect that it was done with malice, if it was a point of conflict on substance. But my feeling was that often the female member was not even heard when she was in conflict. She was just ignored, and I think that was a matter of conditioning. That has radically changed over the years. One now listens very carefully to what one’s female colleagues say. They are included as full participants in any faculty discussion. That has radically changed over the years. In other areas of Holland business, one finds women more and more in places of prominence. In all of the professions, they are just... there I think that reflects America as a whole. I don’t think Holland has lagged behind. I think we’re very representative of America as a whole in terms of the acceptance of women.

AP: Are there any controversies or issues that stick out in your mind either in the church or in the community of Holland?
DB: I wouldn’t describe them as controversies so much. One of the things I see is the widening gap between rich and poor. If one looks at the housing in Holland, one finds a great diversity in the quality of housing in the center city, which is to say that back in the late 19th century, when people began to build their second houses after their first log domiciles, the people who were well to do, the people who owned the tanneries, like Isaac Capon, built very close and in the midst of the people who worked for them. One begins to wonder whether zoning really is a social blessing, that separates on the basis of income. I think there was something very salutary in the way workers and management lived side by side and went to the same churches on the basis of location. As I see these horrendously large developments of supersized homes that probably run from three quarters of a million up in gated communities, it speaks of a social isolation that wasn’t there earlier. One begins to wonder whether the sensitivity of management that was manifested in the Herman Miller corporation under the leadership of the DePree’s is going to continue with the social isolation of the rich from the poor. I think that’s a real question.

AP: It’s actually a condition that often predates a revolution in the history of most other countries.

DB: Yes. In the old days before the French Revolution where the nobility was not taxed, and the clergy was not taxed, only people who worked were taxed. One has to worry about present system of taxation where the poor, percentage wise, carry a heavier percentage basis of taxation. I think that’s caused a real social concern, which is sort of reflected in housing patterns in Holland, or at least the ex-urbs of Holland.
AP: A lot of people have mentioned the lack of affordable housing for all of the workers being drawing into Holland as a real problem nobody's really addressed.

DB: For a while in the 70s and early 80s that was being addressed. There are several housing developments on either side of 44th Street west of River that were put up under some government program that made it advantageous to invest in low-cost housing. Those government programs have long since disappeared, and nobody's building that sort of housing anymore. It's a real problem.

AP: What is your assessment in the job the city itself is doing in addressing it's own problems? (tape ends)

DB: ...above average effort to incorporate its minorities. To say above average is not to say that they're a model of perfection by any stretch of the imagination. But I think there has been an attempt to address the concerns of the minorities, which certainly places Holland head and shoulders above many communities. I think the churches of Holland have probably been in the vanguard of civil government. In many instances, civil government had followed the churches and their concerns. I can remember the story being related of one Hispanic asking another why there were so many Hispanics in Holland, and the answer was, "This is a good place to live, people take care of us." While you've also heard stories of exploitation and gouging, both in the fields of housing and automobile sales from time to time, that, of course, isn't confined to minorities. But still, organizations like Community Action House, Christian Neighbors... I know at one time in the 60s, one of our students was given the project of chronicling all of the various efforts that were being made by individual churches
to see where they overlapped and where they could be consolidated to be more effective. The number was really quite amazing. Community Action House today is one reflection of the consolidation of some of those services. Good Samaritan was another consolidator of services. There are still churches involved in many individual efforts. Third Church, for example, is involved in Habitat for Humanity, building or rehabbing houses for the poor. There’s another effort, I’m not sure whether it’s affiliated, or whether it’s an individual effort to work as a group of people with families providing various services and help in mainstreaming them into the community, and the ways of community life in this climate and society. The community kitchen down the hall, where hot meals are served five times a week to anyone who wishes to come in and eat without any payment whatsoever. The cooperation of the food providers in the community, who usually keep a large flow of foodstuffs flowing into the kitchen to serve to those people is another evidence in the way in which the church community has attempted to administer to those needs. I suppose that there is a sense in which, and here my political bias will show, but I suppose it’s a reflection of a 19th century Protestantism as a whole that the churches in Holland are still much more active in hands on helping people in need than they are in dealing with systemic structures of society. They will vote for people who are in turn going to vote for the preferential treatment of the well to do, while in their personal lives and churches, they will be very active in preferential treatment for the poor. That’s an understandable reflection of where we’ve come from. One would hope we could get the two closer together and see the lead for working systemically
through government as well as individually through churches. But all and all, I think the Holland civic government has done a good job in following the need of the churches and seeking to address the needs of minorities, not only ethnic minorities, but also the disabled and the disadvantaged, physically and emotionally.

AP: Do you have children?

DB: Yes, two children.

AP: How was Holland for raising a family?

DB: Outwardly ideal. Inwardly it has most of the problems that any other area in America has.

AP: Did you face some of those problems raising your children?

DB: Yes.

AP: What school system did they go to?

DB: The Holland Public School System.

AP: Where you pleased with the education they had to offer?

DB: Moderately. I took a Sabbatical when the boys were ten and twelve. They went to the Overseas School of Rome during that year, which was a very creative school.

When our youngest son came back, he did not find sixth grade very challenging. His teacher recommended at the end of the year that on the basis of his grades he be held back because he obviously wasn't performing up to par. We said that was alright, but before we made that decision, shouldn't he be tested to see what the learning difficulty was. It turned out that when he was tested, he was reading at the tenth grade level. The teacher was honest enough to smile and say, "I guess I've just been
boring him to death." With that, she passed him on. The fallout of that was that he never applied himself very hard after that. We’d have these endless conferences with his teachers, and I remember one particularly when a teacher in high school questioned us of our approaches, and we said we had tried threats, bribery by offering him his own color television set if he got his grades up to an adequate level, and none of that had helped. The teacher said, "I’ve tried everything I know, and I haven’t found anything to get him to work, either. But don’t worry about it, he’s a good boy, he’ll turn out alright." He got as far as his second year of college, and he found out that if he was going to pursue his desired vocation, he had to be able to pass this one course that had a reputation as the great divide: you either passed with flying colors and were allowed to go on, or you were shunned into some other department and vocation. So he tried studying, which is something he hadn’t really done since the overseas school of Rome, and to his surprise, he came out second or third in a class of seventy students. With that he put together the marvelous discovery that, yes, studying did help. Since that, he’s gone on to get his masters and his doctorate. The teacher was right, he did turn out alright.

**AP:** So as far as creativity in the classroom, it’s not stressed enough here?

**DB:** In the class in which John was in at a particular point in time, that was not the case. Creativity and challenge was not in great supply. On the other hand, we’ve found any number of teachers who have had great compassion and great sensitivity toward students, much more so than the children’s peers.

**AP:** Speaking of creativity, how do you find the artistic atmosphere of the community as
far as community events and the college? How would you describe that?

DB: There I would rate Holland very high. While Erma and I personally enjoy the arts tremendously, both auditory and visual, there is far more offered than we can possibly attend and keep up with. I look forward to retirement just to have more time to devote to enjoying everything that's offered here. This is an extremely rich community. It's interesting, just in the past thirty-five years, the tremendous catch up that's being done in the visual arts. Coming from an iconoclastic background, which the Dutch Reformed were, it's interesting that from the very beginning, Hope College had a great deal of choral music. In Hope College, they were singing hymns long before the churches were singing hymns, and then branched out into all sorts of other choral music. The music department had I don't know how large a staff when we came, when the art department was still a single person. Since that time, the visual arts have a building of their own, as the music people have a building of their own at the college. But not only at the college, but in the community as well. Galleries have sprung up all over the place. There's a great flurry of activity in the visual arts. The college has turned out some very, very fine artists. Not only the artists that teach there, but also many of their students that have gone on to be very competent. Rein Vanderhill, for example; Lisa Vanderhill, who now works out of Paris, just to name two. So they've played catch up very fast in the visual arts.

AP: There's a lot of lawn sculpture throughout the campus and the community as well.

DB: Yes, all the way from Bill Mayer's abstractions to Edgar Prince's very representational community groups. Then there are the Padnos ad hoc abstractions on
lower Pine near the Padnos recycling yards.

AP: What kind of responses do people have to these different pieces?

DB: It depends entirely where their tastes are. There are people who think that Bill Mayer’s stuff is just the most awful junk they’ve ever seen and why did they put it there. Then there are the other extreme who think, why in the world would people pay to have these bronze ensembles that are totally representational, why would you do that? So you’ve got both extremes. But this is America where both extremes have their place.

AP: In different classes here, we’ve taken a look at the editorials that have come in on different artistic work that has gone on in the community. So look at those and see what people have said about this or that in the newspaper. Of course, those are very extreme opinions.

DB: Well, after the aluminum sculpture was put out here right between the two chapels, which I understood was dedicated to Van Raalte, or at least Van Raalte’s name was at least attached to it. I always enjoyed twitting my friends who didn’t like it by saying I thought it was rather appropriate, and adequately represented Van Raalte’s angular personality. Elton Bruins, in particular, never liked that remark. Elton and I are good friends, but Elton is much more happy with the present statue for Van Raalte in Centennial Park.

AP: Do you think that there is a generation gap in Holland?

DB: I think there’s always been a generation gap everywhere. It’s part of growing up.

No. Probably the biggest generation gap occurred in the early days of the colonies
when the children learned to be fluent in English, while their parents still had
difficulty, or in some cases, refused to learn English. I know I just recently read in
Elton Bruins’ wonderful book on Van Raalte of the Dutch family that were going to
be true to the faith, which they saw as refusing to learn English. The grandmother
then confessed later that we were wrong, because now we can’t even talk to our
grandchildren. There’s a generation gap. But that generation gap keeps repeating
itself with every group of foreign born immigrants, whether they’re Hispanic, or
whether they are southeast Asian.

AP: Yes, because we really do have a similar situation with Spanish speaking people. A
lot of the old time Hollanders I talk to cite that in the early days of Holland, they
believe that all the Dutch came and immediately took to English and said that we need
to learn English and teach our kids English. They cite the Spanish speaking people as
not doing that, and they think it’s wrong of them.

DB: No, (laughs) it didn’t happen. That’s a revisionist history. That’s very revisionist
history. One of the churches here, they were still speaking Dutch into the 1930s, one
of the Reformed churches. This wasn’t just an occasional service, this was their
regular service mode. There was a real struggle in Third Church when they wanted
to move to English. As a result, still another church was started. First Church, of
course, was still speaking Dutch at that time. No, the Dutch were not particularly
eager to learn English. Van Raalte felt that they were now Americans, and he
worked hard for English in the schools and English at Hope College. Instruction,
from the very beginning, was given exclusively in English. Van Raalte had the
foresight to see that, and probably did a lot to help with the Americanization of Holland. But no, the Dutch weren't paragons of virtue in wanting to learn English. It was as varied as the personalities of the people were varied.

AP: Do you have any thoughts on the instruction in the schools today for Spanish speaking children? Some people argue as to whether or not they should teach both languages, or the kind of sink or swim mentality.

DB: I guess the goal would certainly be, as it has always been in America, to help the immigrant learn the language of the nation. If that learning of the language is facilitated by the use of Spanish, then yes, I think it's a positive factor. If it becomes a detriment to learning English, then I think it's a detriment to the student. But there, I think, one lets the professional educator be the guide rather than jingoistic politics. In reality what is going to happen is that, in terms of perception of individual teachers, sometimes it's going to be a hindrance to learning English and, hopefully in the majority of the cases, it would be a help to learning English. But as long as the objective is to help the student to be a learner and learn English, then I think it's a positive factor.

AP: Do you think that being a kid today is a lot different?

DB: It's different in the sense, and this is true not only in Holland, Michigan, but almost all over the world, that there are no longer closed communities. Van Raalte purposely chose Holland where there was nothing but Indians, a couple of English missionaries, and a lot trees, simply so that in the formative days of the colony, they could be a colony of like minded religious folk and establish their identity before
being assimilated and scattered to the wind, so to speak. Elton does a good job in his book of chronicling that intention. Today, keeping a closed community is no longer possible. Television, and now the internet, brings as much of the world as you want into everyone’s living room. I just came back from a trip to eastern Anatolia, and there on the high plateaus in sight of Mount Ararat, where people still live in mud structures with tiny rooms and flat roofs, on every mud house, there is a white TV dish. Which means that inside of that mud house, there is a TV set that can pick up all the world. Fifteen years ago, on a trip to Ephesus, Turkey, I was told that the most popular television program in Turkey was Dallas, one of the posh sitcoms. Everybody wanted to come to America to live like Dallas.

AP: Now it’s Baywatch, that’s the most popular show in the world.

DB: In that sense, it’s more difficult for children to be guided by their parents, and their parents’ values, and the values of their religious community. Over against that, I think one should not lose sight of the fact that perhaps the love and nurture within the family is still more powerful than outside influences. It probably ranks something like: family, peer pressure, outside influences.

AP: We can probably start to wrap up. Maybe just as one final thing to think of, has there been one or two things, or something that’s been very important in your life here, or a significant event, or what would you be most thankful for in being here?

DB: Now you’re asking a question which goes into ordering, which I seldom do. I guess I’m thankful and grateful for a great many things about the community. I’m grateful, first of all, for a wonderful and loving wife and family, for a wonderful place to
work, with good colleagues, for a variety of opportunities in terms of my vocational field, my involvement in overseas seminars, both for the seminary and for the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art, and Architecture. I'm grateful for a well ordered community, which still has, basically, law and order seemingly in hand, without being repressive. Except for excess speeders. (laughs) I'm thankful for the church community here, for the level of ecumenicity, which is manifested among many of the churches. The fact that when St. Francis De Sales burned down just two years ago, our congregation, which is closest to it geographically, could invite the members of St. Francis to worship in Third Church, and invite the school children to have mass daily in our chapel. Hope College invited the English speaking component of St. Francis to worship in their chapel. I think all of this is reflective of a community which has many Christian virtues, and for all of that, I'm grateful.

AP: Certainly many things to be thankful for. Well, if there's nothing else we should hit on that we haven't...

DB: No, I'm content to wrap it up.

AP: Well thank you very much for taking this time out today.

DB: Good. Well, give Larry my regards.