

7-17-2000

Vandervelde, Rick Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College

Melissa LaBarge

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/retired_faculty



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

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: LaBarge, Melissa, "Vandervelde, Rick Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College" (2000). *Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College*. Paper 19.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/retired_faculty/19

Published in: 2000 - *Retiring Members of the Hope College Faculty (H88-0234)* - *Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project*, July 17, 2000. Copyright © 2000 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 Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.

Joint Archives of Holland
Oral History Project- summer 2000
Retired Hope Professors
Interviewee: Dr. Rick Vandervelde
Interviewer: Melissa LaBarge
17 July 2000

ML: Where were you born and where did you grow up, and your education?

RV: So you want some of that information. I was born in Waxahachie, Texas. My father was a college professor, my father and mother- musicians. And he was at Trinity College while it was in Waxahachie for two years. When it moved to San Antonio where Trinity is now- Trinity University- he came back up to Kansas, which is where our roots were- to Salina, Kansas. So my early growing up was in Salina- my family's out of Kansas. Then we moved to Iowa- Lake Minnola, Iowa. And I went to Simpson College, then on to the University of Iowa for my graduate work. We came here in 1967 and stayed, except for one year at Clemson when I was on leave.

ML: How did you hear about Hope?

RV: Couple ways. Elliot Tanis- he has background in this area, and I had met Jay Folkert through him at math meetings while I was still in graduate school. Elliot was here by then- he came here in '65, and he and I were in graduate school together. We overlapped from '60 to '63, so that was my contact. This was the kind of school I was looking for.

ML: Why's that?

RV: I was looking, I think, for the kind of community- overall community- in which to raise a family. A type of environment in which I wanted to be very active in

teaching- involved with the students, and Hope was the kind of school that I think offered that.

ML: Had you heard of Hope before?

RV: Prior to that- no. I probably had not heard of Hope prior to about 1964- I wasn't aware of it. My background is not with the Reformed Church- it's Presbyterian primarily. Though I was aware of Central College in Pella, I wasn't aware of Hope College.

ML: What was the hiring process like when you came?

RV: At the time I came, there weren't a lot of mathematicians coming out of grad school at that point, so it was really to the advantage of the people looking for a job rather than the school's. The reverse has taken place now so that now, in the last few years, it's really been a tough market for the people coming out of grad school. But I had earlier interviewed with Jay Folkert- who was chairman at the time- and Elliot and others, but I wasn't ready to come out. And then that spring, I interviewed at the math meetings- I came here in March to visit the campus. I had one other interview scheduled, but when I went home I canceled it and said, 'I'm going to Hope'. It was the place I wanted to be so I selected it.

ML: What was Hope like when you first started here?

RV: It was smaller. I want to say it was somewhere between fourteen and seventeen hundred- I'd have to look that up in enrollment. So it was smaller- I want to say probably close to fourteen, but I don't recall. Certainly there were fewer faculty, fewer students, required chapel. That was the era in which that was still there. When I first came, it was just prior to the governance system which now we

operate under here. So basically, faculty meetings were meetings that decided things. The faculty as a whole discussed and made decisions. It was shortly after that the whole committee structure, board Structure, was established. In fact, it may have been established that very year in which the whole governance, scheme of things, changed from the faculty as a whole doing something, but rather through the board and committee structure. I won't say we were closer to the students, but I think because there were fewer students, we didn't have as many to deal with in that regard. I think the nature of the faculty- we were more involved with each other throughout the campus perhaps than we are now. We have friends throughout the campus, but we can't be socially involved with as many people as the whole faculty now and back then. Especially within our Math Department... very close relationship between and among the people in the Math Department. And that includes students. We had more majors then, more math students then, and I think we had a closer relationship with them. I think in many ways, especially within our department, the faculty- even the new faculty- identified with the college and became part of the community, and I think one of the things that disappoints me now is that the faculty are less inclined to identify and be part of the campus community as a whole. They get so involved in their departments and their academic endeavors with their students, but I think the identification with the college- to some extent- may be lessened, at least in some cases.

ML: That leads to an interesting question about the whole Holland community. What did you think about it when you moved here?

RV: It was a small town. There was less traffic- I live on the other side of Twelfth Street; I didn't have to wait very long. Now sometimes I have to cross River- it's not as convenient. But I don't want them to put in a traffic light, because I don't want that. Well certainly, society as a whole has changed in thirty-three years. And I think Holland has caught up a bit with society in general. It is more of a city than it was then when it was more of a smaller town. I've always been pleased with Holland in the following regard- that it has, I think, a very good industrial business base, which has a good relationship with the community. And that business base is not tied to the automobile industry so that when the automotive economy goes down, the town goes down- like some of the small towns that have this big Chrysler Plant or something. Plus, it's basically environmentally good. I won't say there aren't some problems, but I think relative to the smokestack polluting kinds of things, Holland's industry is not of that nature- very diverse. So that pleases me about the community. One of my chuckles when I came, is the observation that, you know in a lot of small towns there's a gas station on every corner. Well my observation was that there was a church on every corner but not as many gas stations. That's an overstatement, but certainly if you look at the number of Reformed and Christian Reformed churches in Holland at that time- some of them have consolidated and there have been some changes. But that was just one of the things that intrigued me with that about the community, which was more so than you would find in some of the communities in Iowa where I grew up. Not that there weren't church and a presence there, but I don't think as many- especially of one denomination of that

sort. Then I wasn't in a town as big as Holland- I grew up in a town of about five thousand.

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

RV: I'd say both- it depends on the person, the individual. We get involved, certainly, with certain colleagues on campus that we become acquainted with, but we also involve ourselves through church and other neighbors, etc. We have friends outside the Hope community. Intriguing note of that, the second year we were here- maybe the first spring, I can't remember, a couple of people on campus decided to start a bridge group- which is still in operation. Six couples: professor van Putten and his wife and my wife and I were charter members of that group. At that time it involved six professor families. Currently, that same group is in operation and van Putten and Vandervelde are the only professors that are still in the group. We've involved ourselves with townspeople. Professor Hepfinger, who was here at the time, he was a member of that group. Well their next door neighbors, the Millers, at one point when we had some changes became part of the group. Well the Hepfingers are gone, and now we've got a little bit more diverse nature to that Bridge group. And I think through our children also-we sometimes establish some friendships with other families through our children. We live right next door to the Tanis' on Twelfth Street. And, of course, we have sons that are the same age, and my younger son is a year younger than their daughter- and very close friendships between the two families- still maintained.

ML: One thing that interested me was that I read that you helped found the Holland Recreational Soccer?

RV: Yes, we spent '77, '78 in Clemson on sabbatical and down there, my sons got involved in soccer. We came back and they wanted to continue to play that soccer, and Coach VanWieren's brother Clare was very active and I knew him. Through the whole process, I ended up as one of the board members on that initial Holland Soccer League. I did a little bit- and the North Side had already established a soccer program out there in the West Ottawa area and we were a little bit involved with that, and then we got one going here. I was treasurer at one time and so I had this bank account that had small sums of money that we were fussing with. But, yeah, I was involved with that partly because my kids wanted to play soccer and you had to get involved. I didn't know much soccer- they knew about it more than I did because they played. But there for a number of years, I probably coached two teams- one that had one of my sons on it and then some other team to help. So I was often coaching two teams. I had a great time with it for several years anyway.

ML: It's really taken off.

RV: It is, soccer has grown and I think we're to the point now where we have a parent generation that's soccer knowledgeable- some of whom have played. At the time we started, there were very few people that were very knowledgeable about soccer. Now we're to the point where we're seeing former soccer players now involved with their children, and I think that's important.

ML: In the catalogue, it says Hope College is a liberal arts college in the historic tradition of the Christian faith. What does that mean?

RV: I think that means a lot of different things to different people, depending upon how they view their own personal faith and how they view what the college should mean along those lines. I am pleased that we have maintained a very active relationship with the Reformed Church without, I'll say, without the church establishing certain guidelines, which can impinge academic aspects and academic freedom. The school I went to was a Methodist school in Iowa and though it's maintained some ties with the church certainly not to the extent that Hope has. I think our roots are in our founding fathers, Van Raalte, etc., that founded both the community and the school. And I think there were some very strong religious commitments on their part at that time, and those have prevailed, I think, well into this point. What that means, I think that varies- it means different things to different individuals. How we want to exhibit our faith and how we want to express it and how we want to use it in our lives and in our interactions with others and that varies. I've been pleased the last few years and displeased the last few years with the Chaplain's program. Number one, I'm very excited about the student involvement. How long have you been at Hope?

ML: I'm gonna be a senior.

RV: You probably came when the program was already flowing. It was not as active a program- students weren't as involved, they weren't as enthusiastic. So I'm pleased to see that kind of program going through that office. I'm a little bit more of a traditionalist with regard to religious service. I'm willing to see other things

involved, but I'm not as touchy-feely kind of person as some things have happened within the program, which younger people are more involved in, I think. But I also have been disappointed with the program, in that the nature of it has the appearance of Christian exclusivism, with regard to dogma, and divisiveness between and among faculty and between and among students. And I'm disappointed in that. I got an e-mail the other day while I was in Virginia indicating that the Chaplain had resigned, and I'm optimistic that his replacement and the directions it will take will maintain the kind of program that he and his staff have been able to establish with the involvement and enthusiasm- without some of the side-effects that I think we've all been concerned about.

ML: Has that whole situation been the biggest controversy that has happened at Hope since you've been here, or are these just things that happen periodically?

RV: Things happen over time, but I'd say in some sense it has because it's been very divisive. I think the morale among the faculty during the past ten years, and with regard to this, has been noticeable. Of course, the most recent events always seems to be the more prominent. As a historian, you almost have to step back a hundred years and then say, look at things after it's all filtered out. We may see some other things too. But I think it has been, partly at least as it affects us right now with regard to the whole constituency of the college because people who are interested in the college and give money, react to things in plus and minus ways depending on what they are.

ML: With liberal arts, how much interaction is there between the departments and how much should there be?

RV: That's difficult to say. Certainly we have our own areas of expertise and we get involved in those, and sometimes we cross those lines and be expert enough- to interact academically in other areas is difficult. I think it's important for all of us to have a roundness in our background, in the things we deal with, things we interact with. It's a little more difficult sometimes to have those cross-ties and multidisciplinary aspects. I see more of that coming in the sciences; in particular both in our course work and with regard to the interaction between the departments because there's some fuzzy lines, sometimes, between one area and another. You're dealing with things which are part of both and I think our students, and I think we, need to be more involved across some disciplines. Partly because as we go out, we don't know quite where we're gonna be, but as we go out we end up often- not just as scientists- we end up often on teams dealing with situations and we may be the expert as a chemist or the expert as a mathematician. We also have to have some knowledge of the other and interact with other people through that. My reference is mostly just to the sciences in this particular case, but the same is true in other disciplines. We see ties- especially mathematics- into sociology and into economics, a lot of mathematics involved there. Sociology more on the statistics side of things in some ways as it looks at that. My friends over in the Kinesiology are doing things which involve science and involve statistics. So there's a need for that. And then I think always the historic presence that we see. Whether it be Western culture, which is primarily what most of us have been trained in, but more and more things from the far Middle East are having tremendous effects on us. And so I think at the very least,

whether they are part of our active academics as professors and all, I think as students as we go on to the rest of our lives- we need that breadth. I don't know how much it affects me, but one of the required courses that I took when I was in college as a junior... I can't imagine how it all fit into a three hour course- but basically it was some history, philosophy, religions of the Middle and Far East. Now you did that in one three-hour course- yeah right. I have no idea how much that has affected my view of world things since then, but I know, through that course, there are things in here now that are because of that course that I am more aware of. So I think we need to be alert to that. Along liberal arts, this is a touch along that line, but I encourage prospective students, advisees and students to keep their eyes open while they're at Hope. There is a marvelous four-year window from 18 to 22. When you get on a college campus, there's so much going on to participate in, to spectate, to keep your eyes open, your tastes change, it opens up your horizons. And I really encourage students to follow along that- and that includes liberal arts. I don't know what the percentage is, but I'm just going to throw out a number, we can argue it one way or the other- only twenty percent of what we learn in college, will ever really do us any good. If you want to say forty, if you want to say sixty, I don't care. You can say ten- it doesn't matter. The difficulty is that we don't know which that twenty percent is. You look back in ten years and the things you thought were gonna be so important to your career directions as you're studying now- they were important in your development, but that actual material- really not sure what it is that's gonna be right in the middle of you're doing ten years from now. So, we really do have to

be open, and I think that's across the board to liberal arts. The Greek Mythology, there may be some things in there that if we are aware of them affect and influence our lives in... perhaps in positive ways and the ways in which we react. So take a Greek Mythology course- it doesn't matter if you're a kinesiology major- I bet that Greek Mythology course, besides being interesting, might be of benefit to you in some way.

ML: With your math classes, how has technology changed the way that you teach in your courses?

RV: Tremendously, or it can tremendously. When I was in college, there were no electronic calculators or computers. A slide-rule- have you ever seen one of those?

ML: No.

RV: Someday, stop by and I'll show you a slide-rule- for computational purposes and tables- tables of logarithms, trig-tables, things of that sort- you may have confronted those in a math class at some time. We used those in our math and science course in order to do some of the calculations we needed to. The calculator and the computer and the software does a lot of that for us now. And it allows us to change the manner in which we ask some of the questions because it can do things that we can't do by hand. And so, the order in which we do certain things and the availability of that allows us to answer questions we couldn't- or change the order in which we deal with those questions. And so, the mathematical software that's available in the computer really allows us to do some things. And if we make use of that- some of it visually, some of the visual

aspects of using the computer. Not just the computational but the visual ones allow us to do some things with mathematics. Oh say graphs of relationships and things. We can visualize and from that ask and move in directions that we wouldn't have. We might have been just working really hard just to try to get a picture of it before. The computer gives us that picture now. We can nail down things about that in other ways.

ML: So are students today learning more things...

RV: I think so.

ML: Or are they just learning different things?

RV: They're learning some more things and they're learning them in different manners. Because we can use the computer to help illustrate things, it can be used. It takes away some of the... well, if you don't like to take seven times six- let the calculator do it. And seven times six isn't as important- you still have to be able to do some of those things by hand, I'm not saying that we don't, but it allows us to do something else.

ML: Has Hope become more or less diverse since you've come- this is both with the students, with the professors, ethnically and religiously?

RV: I would say in some ways, the student body has become more diverse. If you look at the number of students from Michigan in 1970 compared to now, thirty years, or you look at the number of students who have Reformed Church upbringing or background- those numbers are less now than they were. So in that regard it's probably more diverse. I don't know exactly- you probably have to ask some the sociologists who've looked at some of that more closely. But I

would say so. Faculty also- probably more diverse. I can't say for sure on that, but just as I look back and think about that- I think faculty would be more diverse in background. So there's been an effort for multi-cultural diversity in both the student body and the faculty, which has not been achieved to the level we'd like, our campus would like to see it, but there is some diversity there- more so.

ML: Have you ever done a May term or a June term?

RV: I've taught some May or June terms.

ML: Have those been a different atmosphere than the regular school year?

RV: Yes they are, and I really like the May and June terms in some regards. Certain courses you can't teach- you don't have enough time. If you think about it, a three-week or even a four-week period for certain things- there's an element that you just have to be able to sit back and allow some of it to soak in. But some of the courses that we do, I think, work very nicely because you're concentrating- that's all you're doing. You don't have... it doesn't spread over a four month period, and the student's aren't doing other things. If you think about it, two or three day a week class- so you meet Monday, Wednesday, Friday and then there's a break, and you come in on Monday again, and you've got all these other things you're doing. But in a May term, what do you do? You work on it all morning every day, and it's very concentrated. And I think for certain courses that works very well. The class, generally, are smaller too. I've had some classes- some things we were doing sounds funny- but we were standing up in the window during Tulip Time counting the busses driving down Ninth Street. Now we're doing it in a number bases, I mean there's a reason for us doing that for what

we're doing. But, we can do that eight, ten, twelve people. You can't do that with thirty-some, which is the size of some of the classes we have. You get to know the students better. You're spending all morning with them everyday for three weeks- better interaction. So, there are plusses and minuses, but I find May and June term for certain things to be a very different atmosphere- enjoyable. One of my sons took one of the World Lit.'s during May Term, and there were really two sections combined. The Fiedlers, John and Julie Fiedler- do you remember? Anyway, they were both teaching one, but they combined it into one class, and so everyday you had two professors who had differing points of view sometimes in a discussion, as well as the students. It was a very different atmosphere during that three weeks for my son than it might have been during the year where you go three days a week and spread it out. So I think it was a very positive experience for him from that class.

ML: What led to your decision to retire?

RV: Oh, several factors I guess- the stock market. Well, you got to have enough money to retire. The stock market has done well over the last ten years, and hence the monies I have there in my retirement funds has done better than one might, I guess. So I mean that's a factor- you've got to be able to afford to retire. Probably the key was that my wife and I are healthy- still healthy and you never know. My mother had cancer and MS and so my father retired at 65 and my mother died that summer. They were able to do things, but my father always said he wished he'd retired at 62 so he and mom could've done some things. And he encouraged me to consider doing that because you never know. Now my wife is

healthy and I'm healthy so we don't have the same aspect to concern us. But we never know- you never know what's gonna happen in the next two or three years. And so I think being able to afford it and just observing and talking to my father, and making sure that my wife and I, now that the children are gone, have time to do things with them and their families- but also with each other. It's a little hard to do during the year. So, I mean that's an aspect. I had not planned to retire early, but certain things just fell into place and so I did.

ML: What are you planning on doing with your retirement?

RV: To start with, the really funny thing is I'm teaching full time this fall because we didn't get all the hiring dealt with in our department so I have agreed to teach full-time. But that's just one semester. My wife has- we have a business, a typing service. Basically what she does is the typing service for Professor Meier's psychology books, which there are some other things going on. So that will be maintained for a few years, so I will help her to help ease up the amount of time she has to spend. So some of my time will be spent doing that. In January, we've rented a house in Alabama at the Gulf with two other friends who've also retired. And so we're going to be at this house on the beach. But, in addition to that, we've purchased a condo on the beach in Gulf Shores, Alabama and plan to spend some of our time down there with that. And our families love the beach and love that so they'll be there. We had our first grandson seven weeks ago.

ML: Congratulations.

RV: Thank you. We were in Colorado at the time. We didn't see him until he was two weeks old- that was tough on my wife not to be right there. And there's

excitement of that sort, and we're very close to our family with activities of that sort. My wife and I both play golf- we love to walk on the beach, and maintain her business. We haven't made any big plans. So we'll just sit back a little bit.

ML: Are you still going to be still doing things like have advisees in the fall?

RV: No, I'll just be teaching full-time, but I'll be full-time within the department and its activities. So everything we're doing that. Plus, I started about three years ago as an assistant coach for the cross-country team, and I plan to continue that as long as I can stay with them. So, I'll be doing that yet for at least this year- hopefully for four or five more years, but we'll see. I can't run as fast as I used to, and those people are starting to run faster.

ML: How long have you been running?

RV: I started probably spring of 1978, primarily running, and just love to do it. So about three years ago I asked coach Nordhuis if he minded if I joined him everyday, and that's sort of grown into an assistant coach situation. It gave me a new dimension- a new interaction with the students, and I've really enjoyed that- that's been a real plus for me. Much different, you know- students from all across campus with different majors. I run into not just math students and people taking math classes- but running through the woods talking about other things everyday. So, it's been a real plus for me and hopefully for them too.

ML: How much of your time was taken up by things other than teaching, for instance committees?

- RV: It just does. It just does, right. And I think it varies from faculty member to faculty member as to how involved they get in some of those kinds of things. Some of us are more involved than others.
- ML: What are you gonna miss most about Hope?
- RV: I don't know yet. That I don't know yet- partly because I'm going to maintain contact with the students through the cross-country. And so I won't miss that the way I might. I don't know. I don't know whether I'll miss the teaching or not. I probably will because I really enjoyed that in many ways. I hate grading papers, most of us do. That's a funny thing. I won't miss that. I think for a lot of us, I probably shouldn't say this but I think most of us will admit it, in order to be a teacher you sort of have to have a little bit of that performance mode. It comes through the theater or the arts or something like that. There's just something about getting up on stage and performing. And I think I'll miss some of that because that's a bit of my nature, I think. But I can keep some of that going with the cross-country too, so I'll be alright.
- ML: I heard that you wore a tuxedo your last day of teaching.
- RV: Yup, yeah I did. I had to do something. I don't know why, I just decided that I had to do something. So I had this tuxedo that I bought new in 1958, and I put it on and wore it. I said, 'we've got to celebrate the last day- so to speak'. And so I wore it, and I think everybody had fun with it. I did- I had fun with it. They did- they thought it was fun.
- ML: That's all the questions I have. Is there anything that's popping to your mind about any memories?

RV: No, not really. I just think in my early years I really thank, and you may have read a little bit about some things that I've said, really thank the people that were here at the time I came, such as Jay Folkert and Elliot Tanis and Chuck Stekettee and all. Just for their presence in the Math Department at the time I came, and the way that they sort of brought me right into the place. We had some great summers. At that time, we were doing some things with NSF- summer institutes for high school students. And, working with Elliot and Jay- those summers with those- I had about forty-five students and we had guest lectures and all. It was just a great experience for me so I really thank them for those early years and some of the things that happened then. I think now... I'm optimistic about perhaps some of the directions the college is going to go. I think President Bultman's enthusiasm and all.

ML: What direction do you see that going in?

RV: I think Hope will have a better relationship with the alumni constituency because of Bultman. I think we will continue to grow with a national reputation both as a school and as our students- as they go out and perform in the world. I just see Hope growing that way in the eyes of the world. And I think Bultman is going to help us spearhead that with his enthusiasm and his support and just the kind of person he is. So, I'm optimistic about that. We'll see. I got to tell you a little story. This is a funny one. My father was a college professor, and he and his friends always joked every year that when friends would leave or retire, and every year, of course, they are replaced. And each year when the replacements are introduced- introduce the new faculty members- and always in light that these

people we are bringing in will add to the strength and improve the college, improve the faculty. So I laugh that by my retirement they'll hire somebody that will improve the college.

ML: So there is not a replacement for you yet? See, they can't even replace you.

RV: Well, my replacement hasn't been hired yet- that's right. So anyway, I always chuckle about that. I always thought it was funny when my dad and his friends talked about it, and now that I'm at that point I chuckle. Yep, they'll introduce somebody next year who's essentially, quote "my replacement", and this person is brought in to improve- we're on the way up.