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Dalman, Curly Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Oral History Interview
Holland Rotary Club
Interviewee: Curly Dalman
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds
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GR: Curly, can you tell me about when you joined Holland Rotary?

CD: I joined there in 1939, didn't I?

GR: I think you did.

CD: The same year that [Marion or "Mert"] de Velder did, except he came in a little bit ahead of me. But for awhile there, he was the youngest one. Then when he got transferred, got to be General Secretary of the denomination [Reformed Church in America (RCA)], he left Rotary for a few years, left Holland, and then I was promoted to being… Before I forget it, I want to tell you about…Cornie [Cornelius J. Steketee]…oh, what's his name again…lived here in Waukazoo. His father [Cornelius Neal Steketee] was an early Rotarian, and he showed a picture in Rotary, a picture with all the founders of Rotary on it, of Holland Rotary. That would be very interesting from the Rotary standpoint.

GR: Do you think he still has that?

CD: Cornie's dead, but his wife might have passed that picture on to some of the kids because it was quite a historic…Cornie thought it was quite the thing, and I thought it was great, too. They could have had it enlarged or something or a print, just use it for a day or two and bring it back.

GR: Why did you join Rotary?

CD: Why? Well, that was a rather strange thing. I was already at People's State Bank in 1933. There was pretty well established…what were some of the early clubs like Rotary…I just can't think of their names right now.

GR: Where there Kiwanians?

CD: There were Kiwanians.

GR: Was the Elks Club around then?

CD: No.

GR: Moose?

CD: Moose didn't come until after…Well, anyway, there were several. The one that was the most prominent club in town was not Rotary. I always figured that Rotary was the top-notch deal in town, and it was. But there was a group that had established the club before Rotary. Some of these people didn't stay, they quit. In Holland, as I remember it, they were really the big shots of the community. I was an officer of the bank; I was one of three people that were running it, so on and so forth. The other two fellows, Clarence Klaasen and Clarence Jalving, were members of this other club. One day a fellow by the name of Byrd walked in the bank, and he saw Mr. Jalving there. He said, "Hey, Jalving, I belong to Rotary and we want to enlarge the club a little bit, and you're not represented." Jalving said, "Oh, that's right," so he pointed at me and said, "You belong to Rotary." So I just took that on, and from that day on, I've heard some of this to me. Well, it's true, the whole scales and everything else. I enjoyed it a lot; there was a wonderful experience. The thing about it was that they were the founders of the Holland Rotary Club that were in there. The thing was founded in 1922 [1920 actually], something like that.

GR: What were some of the positions that you held there? Were you president at one time?

CD: Yes, president of Rotary. I was also chairman of the Program Committee. If you want a little history, in 1930 I was on the job at Bush and Lane Piano Company, which is Baker

[Furniture] Company now. I worked there for about 4 years, and when I started there, there was about 300 people connected with that company. I had a job in the office there, assistant to the chief bookkeeper. He was very ahead of the books a lot of the times, and I think they had to be done wrong. He said, "You do this; you do that." Anyway, business got worse and worse and worse and finally went bankrupt in 1930. You wouldn't believe this, but out of all those people, there were only 4 people left. When I went to work there, it was just a dead as a door nail. One morning he called me, the secretary of the company, the head bookkeeper, and the chief engineer into his office. He says, "Boys, I got to tell you that we can't stretch it any further. We've just run out of money. I just returned from the banks; they have a mortgage on my building. I've turned in my keys." He said, "There's three of you boys, but they asked me to get them a night watch and a day watch because of the size of the company." So he looked at us, and we stood there kind of dumb, and he says, "They'll pay $25 a week or something like that. But you'll have to work 7 days a week—that's a night watch and a day watch. I did some fast thinking, and I had seen that this was going to happen. They were very nice to me, they were very good. They hired my as an assistant in liquidating. If anybody came in and wanted to buy anything, they sold machinery, they sold pianos, they sold this, and they sold that. They thought I was doing a real good job. The president called me into his office one day, he says, "We've got 15 radios up in the third floor. We want $35 a piece for them. Anything you get more than, you can have." That was very seldom that he did that, but he did that because he wanted to sell the radios. So, that was shortly before it collapsed. Anyway, I had stowed away every dime I could. I had just been married in 1929, no children. I was only getting…I got as high as $35 a week. I was

renting a house for $25 a month. I worked 5 ½ days at the factory, then I was clerking at Boter's Shoe Store, a men's shoe store in Holland, Saturday afternoon and evening just to get another 5, 6, or 7, 10 bucks. My wife was frugal, and by golly, if I made any extra money, I stowed it away. So I had a little bit to go. Things just had fallen apart completely in 1930. So I thought, "I'm not going do it." I can live two or three years with what I got stowed away, and I'm not going to go to work that amount of money. I said, "I'm sorry, thanks for the invitation." The secretary of the company had a wife with several children, and he says, you really need to have the chief engineer there, because he's familiar with all the mechanical things. I'm 19 and I was out of a job, that was in November of 1930. In 1931, about the middle of the month, I get a telephone call one morning, and said, "Mr. Dalman, my name is so-and-so so-and-so, his name was Titus, Mr. Titus. I have a good-size bank that failed in Muskegon. I've been appointed receiver of the bank in Muskegon. It was also called the People's Savings Bank. I've been a banker all my life." (He was about 70 years old.) You see, they wanted people from the outside, because they didn't want itty-bitty me to be tainted by having too many good friends. So they wanted somebody for the liquidating, and you're supposed to have no heart. He said, "I've been a banker all my life, but I don't know anything about liquidating. They tell me that you've had quite a lot of experience in that, and we'd like to have you come down and talk to us." So this is the bottom of the Depression, and you couldn't get a job no matter how hard you tried. So I went over there, to Muskegon. After talking back and forth, wondering what I could do, what I couldn't do, they hired me. I had not a lot of money, $25.00 dollars a week or something like that, but gee-whiz, when gasoline was 12 gallons per dollar. Anyway, the bottom fell out of everything. So

I stayed there for two and a half years with them. In the meantime, the People's Bank of Holland had run into some difficulties, and they closed, voluntarily, for a year, with the idea of recapitalizing the bank. They were not going to put into liquidation, but they had a receiver appointed. Because he was in the same business I was in, my wife stayed in Holland for quite a while, and I would drive back and forth. I stopped one day, to see if I could pick up any ideas from him that he might have. We got to feeling pretty good. We were both sort of in the doghouse because we had to go around and knock on people's doors and all that sort of thing to get stuff going. Anyway, this man's name was Clarence Jalving, and he was the receiver. I got to be [?] in the two and a half years I worked for the Muskegon Bank, about two years that I dropped in maybe once or twice a month and talked to Clarence. One nice day in May, I happened to have a little time off and I stopped in there and said hi to him and so on and so forth. We just compared notes, how we were doing, and all that sort of thing. I got ready to go and he said, "Wait a minute. We're going to reopen in two weeks, and I want you with me." So in the bottom of the Depression, I get to the bank. In those days there was just the cashier, who was the head man, and the assistant cashier. He said, "I'll make you assistant cashier." He made Clarence Klaasen assistant cashier, and he became the president. So I became the cashier. And from that day on, I was there for 41 years.

GR: What was the name of the bank when it reopened?

CD: It reopened as People's State Bank. Then we sold out to the Old Kent in 1974, and that's when I retired. I worked for the Old Kent for about five or six months. Do you happen to know Jerry Redeker?

GR: Yes.

CD: Jerry could tell you this story, too, because he took my place. Clarence Jalving retired, and I was president for then eight years. That's the story of my life, as far as that's concerned. While I was working for him in 1939—for Clarence, in the bank there—I happened to be there the day that Bill Byrd walked in and said, "We want somebody from this bank in there." Jalving says, "Go right ahead." That's how I got in Rotary. He took care of all the detail, this Mr. Byrd did. There was nothing for me to do but walk over there in a hotel and go and have lunch.

GR: Where did you meet when you first started going to Rotary?

CD: In Holland, see this building was built in 1924, the biggest hotel [Warm Friend Hotel]. They started eating within a couple of years. I don't know where they did, because I wasn't interested, because I was a kid. I was just a kid downtown, and I had a lot of ambition. I was born in 1906, and in 1918, all the boys were coming back from the service. In 1919, they were coming back. Before that, I was 12 years old, and I sold newspapers on the corner of River and 8th. Then it was getting cold, and I noticed that barber shops had shoe shining parlors. That was a nice warm place to work, and the kids that were working there were making pretty good money. And because all the soldiers were coming back, they never shined a shoe before they went. When they were in the service, they had to be shined up, so they continued that practice. It was sort of a meeting place, too, barber shops. So I got myself a job there shining shoes. I was 13, and I made five dollars in tips on a Saturday afternoon. I remember I was getting to be quite a smart guy, because I lived on 24th and College Avenue, so I had been walking back and forth. We didn't have a car or anything, so I proceeded to go across the road to the nice restaurant called the Green Mill Café. I sat there like a potentate. I got a piece of pie, a

sandwich, and something to drink for 25 cents. All I had to do was go shine a pair of shoes, and have the guy flip me a quarter, and have another meal. I went to high school, and I went to Hope College one year. I was a half year student; I got through in February of 1924, so I had a little time. I worked for the Western Tool Works. I worked there for about 4 or 5 months. That business got a little bit slack, and I got laid off. I took a trip out west with a couple of guys, came back home and decided that was pretty good yet. Anyway, I saved up 100 bucks. So I decided what it was going to be like going to Hope College. So I went over there and enrolled. It was 65 dollars for a semester. So I gave them the 65 dollars and had just 35 dollars left. By the time I got through with my books and everything, I was absolutely stripped. At that time, we lived on 13th Street, right near College Avenue, and it was just a little walking distance from the college. I just tried it and gave it a shot, but it just wasn't my dish of tea. I've been a businessman all of my life, even as a kid. I don't know where I got the extra 100 dollars to get through, but I completed a whole term. I said, "I'm not coming back." For me, all I could get from Hope at that time was a school teacher, a seminary student or the science. So, I wasn't interested in either. I thought, where's the money? There must be money somewhere. So, I was riding my bicycle—we didn't have a car—and I noticed that in front of the factories, by the office, there were cars parked. Alongside of the factory buildings were sheds for the fellows to put their bicycles. In the office is where the money is. So, I went back to Western Tool Works; they hired me again. And I worked there for a year and three months and saved $300, and went to business college.

GR: Which business college did you go to?

CD: It was right there in Holland.

GR: The Holland Business College?

CD: Every town of any size had some kind of business school because there was nothing in the way of a university or anything like that. So, I worked there for a year and 3 months. It cost me $20 a month to go to that business college, so I thought to myself, "There's 20 school days, that's a dollar a day. I'm going to get my money's worth." I really dug in. One of my big problems was that I had lots of friends in Holland, and I was always with some gang or somebody around. Just go downtown, and first thing you know, we're doing something with somebody in those days. Anyway, this little business school, they prided themselves in placing their students. I wasn't even through the whole course yet, and they called my up to the office and said, "We've got a nice position open that we'd like to have you have." So I got a job in a manufacturing jeweler in Holland. People, 10 or 12. Artists, they were making jewelry and this sort of thing. I thought that would be pretty nice. But what happened was the guy who owned the business had diabetes and there wasn't any way you could…some days he felt great, sometimes he didn't. I was with that all the time. I went down the road for him because he did a lot of work by mail. Jewelry would be sent in for repairs, remodeling and that sort of thing. Anyway, I didn't like that at all. I felt there was too much mechanical in there and I was losing my grip on what I learned. So we came to a mutual agreement. The fellow wasn't feeling well, and when he wasn't feeling well he was crabby, and he couldn't help that. So, I just fooled around a little bit and then I got a job at Bush and Lane Piano Company, and that was what kicked me off, started me.

GR: Tell me some of the big things that you remember about Rotary—the polio, fundraising you did in the '80s. Is there anything that you guys did in the '30s, '40s, and '50s for the polio victims?

CD: Maybe you weren't even interested in what I was talking about.

GR: Oh no, it's good background information.

CD: To be honest with you, that was a long time ago. There was always something that they were into. Of course, when this Rotary thing came by, that was 40-50 years ago. That became a big issue; that really got a lot of support. It has turned out to be a wonderful thing.

GR: Do you remember a lot of the children in Holland?

CD: Oh, yes. If you had a child like we did, my wife and I, our son Ron was born…he's 71 now. My wife's cousin was this lady that spent 40 years in an iron lung.

GR: Mrs. Cooper?

CD: Mrs. [Marjorie] Cooper. That's my wife's cousin. So we were definitely acquainted with it. In fact, two weeks or so before she got sick, she had a baby. The baby was maybe a couple months old, so we had to go down and bring a little present for the baby. It was 2 weeks, and she got that terrible thing. She never moved a thing except her little toes for 40 years.

GR: Do you remember when the Rotary came together to help those kids?

CD: Well, yes. In Grand Rapids, they really got a lot of big stuff started there. I think that the big healing place in Grand Rapids [Mary Free Bed Hospital] was started at that time. I know a doctor who's a leading orthopedic surgeon came to Grand Rapids simply because they had such a good hospital for crippled children. He was an orthopedic surgeon, and

he came to Grand Rapids and started with the idea that he could probably be some help to children. So his heart was into it. I got to know him through my golf game. That was very active, and there were lots of things that were done and raised a lot of money. That was very good. But there were a lot of different things in town, too, like Tulip Time, all the support that they could use and everybody was behind it. Getting the windmill in, they were all mostly Rotarians.

GR: From your experience, are Rotarians just in one club or are they throughout the community? Is that they only thing they're doing, that you understand? Or are Rotarians involved in many other projects from your memory?

CD: That I didn't know about?

GR: I just wondered, from your experience, were Rotarians just Rotarians or were they part of the community in general? Did they do more than just go to Rotary Club every Thursday?

CD: Well, this Rotarian thing got started not in Holland, Michigan, it was nationwide for the Rotary International in Chicago.

GR: But you said it was a pretty big deal when you were asked to be in Rotary in 1933.

CD: Well, it was. The main thing about that is because of the character of the people there. They were nothing but the best, biggest people in town, as far as industry and offices and dentists and doctors, and that sort of thing. They lived strictly according to rules and everything else. They were very proud of Rotary. We had one fellow that got to be an expert on the rules of Rotary. That was Dr. Rudolph Nichols.

[End of side one]

CD: …considered the last word on rules, and we lived by the rules. My first job in Rotary was [Sergeant at Arms], I forgot what they called it. We had to go around a collect the fines.

GR: Oh, was that sergeant-in-arms?

CD: Sergeant-in-arms.

GR: Well, you were the banker, that made sense.

CD: So, if you were out to lunch…some people were impressed that they just loved it. Wrapped a gavel and somebody had a fancy tie on, and they said, "Boy, he wants to be seen," get a dollar from him. So you had to walk over and get the buck.

GR: Did you have programs, like we do now?

CD: We had tremendous programs in those days, because of the people, the organizers of Rotary. Willis Diekema, I don't know if you ever knew him or not. He's a marvelous man. He was an absolute wonderful musician, and he loved music, so I thought he was tremendous. He was the head of the DePree Company here in Holland, and he added a lot of interesting. because he got interested in getting music here and that sort of thing. So everybody, those people at that dinner, if they heard a good speech, they would try to get them to come to Rotary. We had some wonderful speeches. I remember one fellow that gave a speech on… he was a missionary in Africa, way in the interior. He had some very serious stories to tell. In the audience, was a member of the Chicago Rotary Club, who was the president of the company that owned the boats here in Holland, the *North American* and *South American*, because they wintered here [docked]. So he was here while they were getting them in shape. He heard this young fellow speak, and he couldn't wait to get out of his chair. He rushed up there and said, "I want you to come to

the Chicago Rotary Club. We have 1200 members, and we'll pay your expenses. I've never heard anybody as good as this." So I felt pretty good because I was the guy who got this fellow to speak. I remember that deal pretty good. In fact, I had to send him some money for gasoline because he was a missionary, he didn't have money. He was living somewhere east of town, Hudsonville or somewhere. I can't even remember his name. So many things have happened.

GR: Curly, did you have any dealings with some of the early boat builders, like Leon Slikkers?

CD: I have to be careful how I talk about that. If you want to know who helped him get started, you go talk to Leon Slikkers.

GR: Oh, I have. I was wondering if you had any dealings with some of the early boat builders in Holland, getting them going.

CD: Have you talked to Leon?

GR: Yes.

CD: Did he mention my name?

GR: Yes, several times.

CD: There was a company [U.S. Molded Shapes] in Grand Rapids making the shells [molded mahogany hulls].

GR: Yeah, the hulls. Do you remember some of the other boat builders, like Captain Gilbert? Tell me about Captain Gilbert…Gil-Boat Company.

CD: He was a different sort of a fellow. I don't know how to explain it to you. He was strange, and he had a man with him that was strange. But he had an idea, and that was to

make metal boats—little rowboats to begin with. He did get set up and he got going. But it didn't last. We had other boat builders. Have you got the names of any other builders?

GR: I could rattle them all off, if you want. Jason Petroelje, Skipper Craft.

CD: Petroelje was working with Leon Slikkers. They were both at Chris-Craft at that time.

GR: There was another company called Wonder Craft, it was the Poll family. Clyde Poll.

CD: I don't know about that.

GR: Well, they might have funded their own company.

CD: I don't think they needed any money. They were the Poll boys from Hamilton, weren't they?

GR: Right.

CD: I knew them.

GR: There was Ken Cook, he had KenCraft, over by the Heinz plant. There was Dutch Craft. You might not remember them; that one was really old.

CD: Leon Slikkers was my first one.

GR: Oh, so it wasn't until the '50s. I thought maybe you had dealt with…you knew Captain Gilbert, though.

CD: Yeah, he was a character. He was absolutely a character. He was a short, pudgy man, full of big ideas. The town gave him some support and gave him a chance.

GR: Did he join the Rotary?

CD: No.

GR: You should have asked him to Rotary. How would you get into Rotary at that time? Did you have to be asked, like Mr. Byrd did with you?

CD: That's right.

GR: Was there anybody that shouldn't have been in there?

CD: No, I don't think so. When I got into Rotary, I'll tell you, I felt very, very good about it, very comfortable because there were a lot of customers that I had at the same time, and they all treated me very well. Enjoyed it because I felt I was with the leaders of the community. They were absolutely the leaders of the community.

GR: Do you think that's still true today?

CD: Well, I guess so, but Holland's getting bigger.

GR: How many people were in it when you joined?

CD: Oh, 30 or 40; it wasn't very many. If you could get Cornie Steketee—I just remembered the name—and see if his wife's still living in Waukazoo. See whether you can get that picture that Cornie took from Rotary one day and passed it around, of the original founders of the Holland Rotary Club, or early life. That would show you… Cornie's father was on there. He was one of the founders.

GR: And Cornie has passed away?

CD: Yes, he's passed away. Nearly all of those people that were in that picture are dead, because it was established in 1922, or something like that.

GR: Around there, yes.

CD: They were mature then. I always enjoyed Rotary, and they treated me real well. They took me right in. If you can imagine, my dad once worked in a furniture factory, and we had seven kids. His nose was to the grindstone all the time. Seven children, but we lost a little boy at 13. He got sick on Thanksgiving Day and died on Christmas of 1929. But that left 6 children, and I'm the only one of those kids that didn't graduate from Hope College.

GR: What order were you in the 6 or 7 children? Oldest, youngest?

CD: I was the oldest. The thing about it was that really made me as much as anything was the fact that there wasn't a lot of money. We never went without anything. We ate good and everything else. They had no car. There was very little spare money around. I wanted anything, I had to get out and earn it myself, and that's where I got my start. They used to have these movies on Saturday afternoon—got a couple little theaters downtown—and it cost 10 cents to go to the movie on Saturday afternoon. They had these continuous stories. They would have the picture for that week, and on one the girl was hanging from a rope or something, you know?

GR: And the train was coming. (laughs)

CD: The train was coming. We had to die to get that 10 cents. You have no idea how you scrounge around.

GR: What theaters were those, Curly?

CD: We had one between River and Central on the south side of the street, in the middle of the block, just a storefront and they had a little cubical in front with some chairs. It was very crude. And there was another one between College and Central. But it was the idea because other the kids could go into it if they wanted to go too. One fellow that helped the kids a lot around town was Mr. [Louis] Padnos, because he never turned down any kids that I know of. He would find a reason to buy something all the time.

GR: Did you do some scrap collecting for Mr. Padnos?

CD: Yes, that's the way you do…that was one of the most pleasant things you could do was go through the allies and find some things that Mr. Padnos would be buying, like metal or newspapers or things like that. He helped a lot of children in town.

GR: Has it been hard getting new members to come to Rotary over the years? During the Depression…

CD: Once in a while somebody would want to get into Rotary and they would pass over them.

GR: So that has happened?

CD: It has happened.

GR: Was it hard during the Depression to get people to join because of the money?

CD: No, most of those people that belonged were the upper crust in town. You know, it didn't take much to keep alive. They had their businesses, there was doctors, lawyers and everything else—professional people, business people, so on and so forth.

GR: When Chris-Craft came to town, the boat company, was there a Rotarian member from the company?

CD: You know, I think there was.

GR: Was it Harry Koll or Bill McCure? Harry Koll was the manager.

CD: Yeah, Harry Koll.

GR: He was a member?

CD: I think he was; I'm not so sure, though.

GR: There was a man that came to Holland about 1960. He was a Rotarian from Grand Rapids. His name was Lawrence Meyering. He had a boat company, too, in Holland. But he also helped set up the international exchange with students in high school. Do you remember him as a Rotarian? Larry Meyering was his name.

CD: Larry?

GR: Larry, or Lawrence, Meyering. He originally came from Zeeland. He worked for Campfield Fiberglass. I wonder if you remember him. He was a Rotarian for Grand Rapids for a while. I was just wondering if you had met him.

CD: No. We used to have quite a few visiting Rotarians; to make up, that was a quite a thing.

GR: Well, staying in the hotel too, I wonder if you had businessmen staying in the hotel that were Rotarians from other towns.

CD: If they just showed their Rotary card, they were more than welcome. They were glad to have them.

GR: So you'd meet it the Warm Friend Hotel?

CD: Yeah. That was built in 1924.

GR: Did you have good meals then?

CD: Oh, excellent. They had a regular chef; they had a beautiful dining room.

GR: Compare the meals from the 1930s and the meals now, what do you think?

CD: Oh, I don't know. I haven't been to Rotary for a year now because I've been laid up. But I'd say generally all the time that we've had Rotary, we've had some very fine meals. For instance, we used to go to the Castle [Castle Park] in the summertime. And when that ran out, we went to the [Macatawa] Yacht Club. They had a wonderful lady from Allegan that cooked all those meals. They were excellent.

GR: Did you ever meet at Point West, out in Macatawa? Did you eat out there?

CD: I don't think we did. We had some meetings there, but I can't remember them. I can remember we had some business meetings there. That was a wonderful place.

GR: Curly, what do you think about the park that Rotary is redoing now, Smallenberg? What do you think of that project? Redoing the park, over by the pool. Do you think that's a

great project that Rotary is doing? The park on Columbia Avenue that we're fixing this year. The kids' park.

CD: The park on Columbia Avenue?

GR: Yeah, near the cemetery. The park that Rotary has adopted, and we're going to put brand new equipment in. Do you think that's a good project?

CD: I really don't know.

GR: You haven't been at Rotary in a year, you probably missed that.

CD: I've been laid up.

GR: Have you been getting your newsletter?

CD: Yeah.

GR: Good.

[End of interview]