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Doolittle, Patricia Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Acacia L. Schut

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Oral History Interview with
Patricia Doolittle

Conducted November 22, 1996
by Acacia L. Schut

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Patricia Doolittle
November 22, 1996
Interviewer: Acacia L. Schut

AS: Where were you born? What was it like?

PD: My father went to Pennsylvania during the Depression to find work. All three of us children were born there. Then, we moved back to Holland.

AS: Tell me a little bit about your family.

PD: I have a sister and a brother, so just the three children. My father was an electrician and my mom never finished school, but she had always loved school and loved reading. Lots of the things she did along the way weren't professional, perhaps, but she taught children in her home, and she worked in Harrington School. She worked as a cook there, but she loved the children. She has always volunteered teaching reading to children because she said that she had a hard time learning to read. Mother and dad were both very involved in the church, and a big part of our life centered around that. I think they probably held some of the major offices in the church, dad being a deacon and also an elder for many years, and mother with her Sunday school class and her catechism class, and then president of the Women's Club at that time. We don't have that anymore. So, between the church life and home life, childhood was not anything like what children experience today. We experienced summers mainly at home, but we lived a block from Lake Macatawa and at that time we could swim in Lake Macatawa, so we "lived" down at the water. I can remember jumping off of piles and diving and just going to the T-dock in front of

the Macatawa Hotel and learning to dive there. The children all came and he [Pat Haley] would tie a rope around our waist and we would learn to dive that way. I learned to waterski in front of the T-dock with the Sligh's, and enjoyed that hotel with all of the fun things. When I got a little bit older, I would, in the summertime, go and work for some of the wealthy people that would come and live in the cottages at Macatawa. I would take care of their children. Childhood was a fun time for us. We also played in the Macatawa Woods, so our lives were just outside. Mothers, at that time, didn't have to worry about their children being taken from the street or wherever they were. We could just be out, and that's what we did. I have good memories. Mother also liked to fish. We could ride down and go, too, in front of the Macatawa Hotel and catch Casey's boat and Casey would take us to the pier and then we could fish. It wasn't barred to us when we were little. We could ride our bikes down to the lake and enjoy Lake Michigan from our side of the lake. Growing up with my sister and brother, and our cousins living just a block away, it was just a very free kind of thing. Probably not as educational as a book type or today's child with the computers. I can remember when television came. There wasn't much on. It was just a test pattern most of the time. Howdy Doody was on and our family would watch the Lone Ranger every Saturday night and that was a big thing, we could eat hamburgs and watch the Lone Ranger. We were one of the first families in the neighborhood that had television and it was a little seven inch screen. My mom would have to line chairs up in the living room so people could come and watch television. A lot has happened in fifty years with all this explosion of educational

materials and communication. You could almost say that we were like the hill's people the way I grew up. I went to Harrington School. At that time they had it through eighth grade. One of the things that I enjoyed the most, because I've always been an outdoor person, was the track meet that we had every fall. The janitor, Mr. John Tervree, was our coach. He really worked with the children at Harrington School. We would have this big track meet every fall with all the schools in all of the outlying districts, and Harrington very often would place first in many, many of the events because we had such a wonderful coach and he would just get the kids to do their very best. That was a fun thing. I was on the girls' basketball team and I enjoyed that. John was our coach for that, too, and here he was the custodian of the school. In lots of ways I guess they just utilized people like that, and let them do what they wanted to do.

It was not an age of materialism when I was growing up. I can remember when my mom was the campfire leader and our carpeting was thread-bare and the furniture also was all worn out completely, but that just wasn't one of the main things at that time. No one really thought a whole lot about it because everyone was in the same boat. I can tell you a story about the campfire times. My sister and I were in the same group, and mother was going to take the whole group out to Mac Woods to look for different things. The car was packed, and at that time she let people ride in the trunk. There were big holes in the bottom of the trunk, you could see the ground. We always wanted to ride in the trunk. Well, that day my sister wanted to ride in it with some of the other kids. Afterwards, mother dropped everyone off and we went

in the house. I was helping my mom getting supper ready and we were peeling potatoes at the sink, and my mom said, "Oh, my word! Mary's still in the trunk!" So, we went out and opened the trunk to a very sad girl who had cried her eyes puffy shut. That was quite an experience. I don't think Mary ever rode in the trunk after that. Today kids don't do that because things are so airtight. Mother was one who enjoyed kids and would get involved in all types of things.

On Halloween, when we got a little bit older, we could take a pillow case, and we would walk all the way from Virginia Park to Macatawa and hit every house on Southshore Drive and then, coming back, we would come up 32nd back to Virginia Park again. We would have these pillowcases half full with candy. That was just a major thing for us because we didn't have candy in our home. It just wasn't one of the things we had. That was fun.

AS: What about your family now?

PD: Well, now we have an extended family, because we have grandchildren, but I think we've had an interesting family because our third--we have three children, a girl and two boys--was born hearing impaired. So, that opened up a new world for us. The world of special education and learning sign language and having to take Michael all the way to Muskegon to school. He's had many years in school, starting when he was twenty months old, in Grand Rapids, then Holland, Allendale, Muskegon, Saugatuck, and lastly, Grand Rapids again. Now he is twenty-eight. It's been quite an enriching experience for us. We've grown a lot through that. Now, he has also, in the last eight years, gotten schizophrenia. So just this last evening, we were in

Grand Rapids listening to a psychiatrist talk about schizophrenia as well as other mental diseases and the great advances that they have done in medicine to help people with mental illness. That, too, has been good. I can now say that he is doing quite well.

We have just had our fifth grandchild, so we're real excited about that, Isabella Paige. They're going back to those good old names, and already she seems to fit Isabella. Her daddy calls her 'Izzy.'

AS: She was just born?

PD: Yes. She's three weeks old. That's fun. I've been over there a lot. Those brand new ones I just love to hold. So, the grandchildren are quite a big part of our life right now. We're just real happy that the kids live around us so that we can do this. Not all parents are that lucky.

AS: How supportive or receptive was Holland with hearing impairment?

PD: It was good and not good. When Michael was born, the philosophy for special education with the hearing impaired was all Oral, and that was here and in Grand Rapids. You did not try to sign to your child; you had to make them talk because they lived in a hearing world and they had to be able to read lips and speak as well as they could. He did start out by going to Wyoming pre-school at twenty months old. I would drive him three mornings a week for that. Michael never was able to really learn to speak. He did say some words, but he still would have to resort to his own signing. He had his own little signs for most everything and we, too, would have to guess at what he was trying to tell us. I can remember the teacher coming from

Jefferson and saying that Michael really was autistic, and that we would never get anything out of him. So, from there he went to the Ottawa Area Center and this is for mentally impaired children. By this time he was about eleven years old. He was there for one month and the teacher said, "He does not belong here, he needs to go to a place where he could learn signing. A place where he could learn total communication, not only learn to speak, and to interpret lip-reading, but also to sign." I would say that his communication began when he was about twelve years old because that's when we could really get together. That was a great joy to see all of the signs coming and having the understanding of the words. It was a long time in coming. After, another lady and I were getting real tired of driving our children to meet a bus in Grand Haven so they could go on to Muskegon, we did meet with the board in Holland and asked that a total communications classroom be opened up in this county. At that time, they did not want it to be in Jefferson School because that's where they were teaching "oral," and they did not want our children on the bus with their children. The board did go to Saugatuck and opened a classroom in Saugatuck for total communications, so we did win. After a period of time, philosophy has changed and now it's total communication for all hearing impaired and now they are all housed in the Holland system. They're not even going to Saugatuck anymore now, they're all in Holland. It's been something to see and watch and I'm glad for every little deaf child coming along that they don't have to learn to try to make out what a person is saying and not being able to hear it. I was behind a mother in a grocery store one time, and she was talking to her little deaf son, and he wanted a

piece of watermelon. She said you are not going to get one until you can say it.

That's the kind of philosophy they had: to keep those rewards there and one day, when they accomplish the word, they will be rewarded. I'm so glad that's not the way it is anymore.

AS: What are some of the organizations you've been involved in? How did you get involved?

PD: I guess mainly my organizations have been with church and school. I've always been involved in the PTO's, being chairman of many of them, and also for the hearing impaired to see that it keeps going. Other than church and being in the Women's Guild... In college I was in different language clubs and so forth. I was a Dorian at that time, they don't have those anymore, do they?

AS: Yes. They're one of the bigger ones again.

PD: Is it? Well, that's wonderful! When did that start again?

AS: I'm not sure. For the four years I've been here, they've been here. What about jobs? What are some of the differences....

PD: Well, I came to Hope to be a teacher, and when I started teaching, every year I taught I would get pregnant. So, then I would just not teach. So, finally I went into teaching pre-school, a nursery school teacher at Cherry Lane. Then I substituted for a long time because I was always taking Michael to different places. It never seemed to be that I could just get on with my professional life. Teaching was my profession and I enjoyed it and did that mostly. All through Central Park Church, I've always taught children in some field, whether it be the catechism or junior cadets. In that

field, just telling children about our Lord which is something very important to me. I've enjoyed substitute teaching even up till just a few years ago, when my husband said that it was not financially profitable. It was not wise to do that because he couldn't get me an IRA. When you substitute teach, all of your money goes into a fund, and if you get that fund you can not have any other retirement plan. Someday, if I ever have that kind of time, I would enjoy going back into the classroom. I have gone into the third grade classroom for child abuse, and talked about safe touching and unsafe touching. Children are a big part of my life.

AS: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in Holland over the past fifty years or so?

PD: I guess the way it has grown. We are not just a small community of Dutch Reformed. Now, we have many different backgrounds living here. I think it's a healthy thing. The corporations that we have in this town are a wide variety. I think our whole town is better for it having the college here and the large corporations so that we can see the diversity between individuals. In High School, I remember one young, black man came. I don't remember a whole lot of Spanish people when I was in High School. I think that they were beginning then, but not the way we see now. That certainly, I see the schools now with ethnic diversity of backgrounds where it wasn't. Crime has gotten to be quite rampant. I never locked a door when I was a child in growing up. No one did. I don't think you would ever even get worried if someone walked into your home. I walked into my daughter's home last night and she was up in bed and she was scared to death. She was wondering who in the world

was coming in and, "Why didn't I lock my door?" Now, we lock our doors, too, before we go to bed. That's a part I don't like to see. I don't think that's just Holland, however.

Of course the water front on the south side of Holland has changed because now we're barred from going there. We can go to the public places and that's it. It seemed like we knew people more, our neighbors. Everyone knew their neighbor when we were growing up. Maybe in town they still do, I don't know, but we're not close with our neighbors the way we used to be. The school systems, with the charter schools, that's certainly a big change. Our churches, too, now we have the mega-churches that seem to be swallowing up the smaller churches. It used to be that families would stay in their own church where they grew up and then that's where they would go to church. We have such a mobile society now, that children don't even live where they grew up most of the time. I imagine churches, then, are different, too.

AS: How has Hope changed?

PD: Well, this library. When I came, it was over at Graves and you can imagine trying to house all of the students over there for the library. It would be quite impossible.

When I came to Hope, I lived at home, but my first year's tuition was \$250 for a semester. At that time, it would increase \$50 each semester for every year that I was in. My first teaching job, when I graduated from Hope, was in Zeeland where I taught kindergarten, was \$4,300 dollars. It's changed quite a bit that way. There were no dorms that were co-ed when I was at Hope. If a girl was caught in a boy's

dorm, they would be expelled. It was quite a change even when our daughter came to Hope and they had co-ed dorms at that time. We didn't have telephones in any of the rooms. I can remember when they were first putting the telephones in the classrooms. I thought, "My goodness! No wonder it costs so much, we have to have a telephone in everyone's room." I don't really know how large our class was then and what they are now. We had wonderful professors. They were professors who cared about their students. I was married before I finished college, and I had to take a class in the summer. I had a miscarriage during that class, and I remember Dr. A. James Prins being so kind and letting me still be able to pass by doing some tests afterwards.

AS: They still care a lot. How have you seen the community reacting to Hope's growth and the change in the student body?

PD: Only what I read in the papers. When they wanted to put up a new building... I think generally the community likes the college and is supportive of the college when the college wants to move houses and so forth. It probably is hard for the people who might be in those homes. I think through the years, Holland has enjoyed Hope and supported Hope in all they've endeavored to do. I don't see a lot of friction or flack.

AS: How is your daily life different than ten or thirty years ago?

PD: Well, right now I'm experiencing my golden years. (laughs) I'm not waiting until I'm in my sixties to say they're my golden years because I probably have the best of all worlds right now. I'm not working and I have my grandchildren that I enjoy.

I've taken up a hobby that I've always dabbled with and that's watercolor painting. Now, I'm doing it seriously where I really try to get at it a few hours more than twice a week, but I try very often maybe five days a week. So, I'm really self-indulgent. Going out to exercise at Evergreen Commons, making sure that I'm getting my exercise and enjoying my hobbies and my family. Ten years ago, I still was going out and working professionally and it was much busier, I think, trying to please everyone else, putting my own interests on the shelf maybe until another day. But, my husband is great because he allows me to do this. He has semi-retired. We do go to Florida in the winter for two months. It's fun to be able to enjoy that. I like the snow, and don't mind being in it, but by February and March I get kind of tired of it. Right now things are very shiny for me. Ten years ago Michael still lived at home, too. I was still seeing him get on a bus or driving him, and then when he got the onset of the schizophrenia it got to be quite hard and for a couple years we didn't go anywhere. Someone always had to be here to watch him and see what he was doing so that he would be all right. Things have changed for the better.

AS: Going back to the growing diversity in Holland, how do you think this interacts with the Dutch Heritage?

PD: When you see Tulip Time and you see all of the children coming down street with the Dutch costumes on, even though their skins don't look like their Dutch, it can make you feel pretty good. It's still a whole city sponsored thing that we have here in town. No one is excluded; anyone may be a participant. That's a wonderful show of how we feel in Holland. That we had a black Miss Holland, I think, was a good

tribute to our city, that we're open minded and allow a young girl to have a black father and a white mother and still support her and love her and chose her to be our Miss Holland.

The churches have the hardest time. That's where you see more barriers than the schools and the city. In the churches we're last to open the doors and really get to know other ethnic people. We tried, in our church, a couple of times this summer, and they were meaningful. Our church went to the Spanish-English speaking church in town where they had a minister who spoke both languages. That was a wonderful evening. Then they came to the chapel in Central Park for the end of the summer and we had a joint worship service together then, and again all that were there just had a wonderful time. I hope it's the beginning of knocking down some of these barriers that we've had. That's where it should begin.

AS: Concentrating on Holland, how do you think the role of women has changed?

PD: Well, I have a daughter-in-law who is in the FMB, the bank, and it doesn't seem to have any difference between the pay that was given to a male or a female and has as many opportunities for advancement that they have had. It seems like in Holland a woman can choose the role that she would like to pursue and they're going to support her in that. We see women doctors, of course teachers have always done that. The Police Force. I think that we've come a long way. When we graduated, we either wanted to be a nurse or a teacher. Now, that's not what you think about anymore. The whole world is opened up to you now and you can just about chose anything you desire to do.

AS: Anything else you want to talk about or add on?

PD: I'll probably think about it tonight, when I go to bed.