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Visscher, Robert Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Robert Visscher

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This is Steven Timmermann and Jay Peters. It is March 7, 1977 7:30 p.m. We are going to interview Mr. Robert Visscher, a former Mayor of Holland. He resides with his wife, the Art teacher at Holland High at 67 E. 28th St.

S: What has been your personal view in the change in the role of govt. since you've been Mayor.

V: Well, I really don't think there has been any real big change in the govt. in the city of Holland from the time I was mayor to the present time. The Charter which the city operates under has had a few minor changes in it, but basically that's the basic foundation of the city govt., just as the constitution is to the Federal Govt. Our Charter is the foundation of the govt. of the city of Holland and basically this has not changed.

We're under the city manager form of govt., as you know with a mayor and the council, and well we did have three boards that were heads of depts. I mean the board of Public Works, The Library Board and what was the Hospital Board. Now the Hospital Board is now divorced from the city. It is now encompassed some of the townships along with it. So it's no longer really part of the city govt. But really, the city govt in itself has'nt changed much, maybe some of the minor philosophies have changed, and what should be done, and this and that. But I think really Holland isn't a great town for big drastic changes. It's a pretty conservative kind of a community.

And I think the big change came about when I was on the Council, as a Council member, before I became Mayor, was when we went to the city manager form of Govt. And that was a pretty drastic change in the govt. way back then.
S: What year are we talking about?

V: Golly, I don't know. In the 50's somewhere. You could look it up, I mean I don't have all these dates. I don't clutter myself with things like that.

But I think that was a big change in the, our govt. And eventually I became Mayor.

And, then another big change was at that time was that we annexed a considerable amount of territory to the city of Holland. At one time the city of Holland went to 32nd street, which is right up here. This is 28th St., so it was only 4 blocks further south. And then we went up to Fairbanks Ave. That's along where your athletic field is, over there. And only up to Ottowa Ave. on the West. And to the river on the North. Well, it hasn't gone any further north. But, it has gone way further South of course, and way East, and way West. Territorially, I would say the city more than trippled in land at that time when I was Mayor. And that was a big change in our govt. And that was a Big change or at least in the, how do I want to say it, not in the govt., but in the city. And this I think has proved to be ultimately a very good thing for the city, and for the residents that were annexed to the city. I'm sure there are some people who will disagree with me that were annexed. They feel they are paying higher taxes than they did before. But, then they are getting the services too, that they didn't before.

I think, Those are well, since the turn of the century those are the two biggest things that took place in the city of Holland. The Charter being adopted in the 50's, with the city manager form of govt., and the large annexation. Now, since then there hasn't
well prior to that there was, it just kind of rolled along you know day by day operation, and so on. And up to that point, then since that point there have'nt been any big changes. Oh, there were little things. And really not that much that really different philosophy in the govt. than there was at the turn of the centuary. I mean Holland is a very conservative type of a govt., or I mean of a community is what I'm trying to say, God fearing people, who will get excited over minor things. But, this is'nt really anything we don't have the upheavals that they have even in the citys such as Grand Rapids, or what's going on in Washington D.C. right now, with all that sort of monkey business. I mean it's a pretty wonderfull town to live in, I feel.

J: How do you feel about our Police Dept., Fire Dept. and our Public utilities? Do you think they are adequately, or proportionally adequate for the size of Holland?

V: I think we will start with the Fire Dept. first. I think for a Community such as Holland, Who have a volunteer, plus Full-time employees. Well this volunteer group, this is kind of a club type of thing. They do a good job, They're trained, and everything like this. And, they go to they're schools for firefighting, and so on. So it's a kind of combination, a full-time fire dept., and the old-time volunteer dept., where they used to run down the st. with a pumper and that kind of thing. And they have a kind of Espirit De Corp amongst themselves, and so on. I really think they do a good job as far as losses are concerned. Our insurances rates reflect this pretty much. The rates are set by the Underwriters or not Underwriters, the Michigan Inspection Bureau. In a town this size the rates are pretty good. So evidently the Michigan Inspection Bureau also feels that the Fire Dept. is doing a pretty good job.
Probably the rates would be somewhat better if we had a full-time 100% fire fighting dept. But, if you went to that, I don't know if the improvement in the rates would offset the cost in taxes, that would be necessary to levy to have a Full-time 100% fire dept. And, really our losses have been relatively minor. We've had some fires. I think, with, they are getting new equipment all the time. They have a couple new Pumpers coming in, I understand. And they've got this new ladder truck. Then they've got a new station over here. And now the Feds are giving them a bunch of money to build another new station, over near Collin Park, as you probably know.

Everything can be improved, and I'm sure our Fire Dept. could probably be improved too, but I really think they are doing a pretty good job for a town this size.

Police Dept., I was just discussing with my wife at lunch this afternoon. The Police Dept. are after quite a tremendous increase I understand in wages for the coming year. I heard they were after 22%. But, they're never going to get any 22% increase to be realistic about it. But, I think according to the paper, I'm only, I'm like Will Rodgers, I only know what I read in the papers on this stuff. There were only 30% of the crimes that were committed in the city of Holland that were solved, last year. Maybe you read this in the paper too. Well if only 37% of the crimes in the city were solved, this is a pretty small proportion, and the crime rate was up considerably. So I don't know what the answer is. They've got a well twice the size of a force today that they had when I was Mayor. The population hasn't increased twice that amount, since I was Mayor. Now if it's the people that or different, or what I don't know. The crime rate is up considerably, in the last few years. Now if they aren't getting to the people who are committing the crimes or if they aren't getting to crime prevention. And really, if you
can prevent the thing before it happens you're alot better off. than if you tried to solve the thing after it happens. But evidently they are'nt doing that either because the crime rate is up.

Now in the utilitiesmost cities do have their own water, sewer facilities. Some cities do not. I mean this is done in a commercial enterprize type of thing. The city of Holland is rather unique in that we have our own power facility here. It has been a good thing I believe for the city. The rates are somewhat lower than Consumer Power rates that surround us. The city also benefits from the profit of the light utility, in leau of taxes, in which they can use to help operate the general city. I think that the service they render, I mean, we've had a minimum of interuptions, I mean as far as Electrical Service is concerned in the city. So really I think that the Light Utility has done a pretty good job for the community. And they're in debt, but these are on a bond issue type of thing, that they are advertizing out of they're own profits, but it really is'nt against, I mean the taxes are'nt helping to support the Utilities or anything else. So I mean as far as the light utility. All of the utilitiys are self supporting, from revenues that they take in from their operation. So I can't fault the utilities in town.

J: What are you doing now as far as your role in govt., anything? Or are you just sitting back and watching it develop?

V: Yea, Well I was on the Board Of Commissioners for 4 years.

J: Was this after you were Mayor?

V: Yes, after I was mayor on the Ottawa County Board Of Commissioners for 4 years. And I have'nt done anything now for 4 years.

J: What years were you Mayor?
V: I knew you were going to ask me that, and as I said earlier I don't clutter myself up with dates, so I really don't know. I could look it up. My wife has it there in a scrapbook there some place I'm sure. But, I was on the council for 5 years, and I was Mayor for 6 years. I asked her at dinner tonight, I said when was I mayor. She said, It's around here somewhere. I could look it up if you wanted me to. I said, don't bother.

As far as govt. is concerned, I have'nt done much of anything else out of being on the Board of Commissioners. I've got too many other projects always in the fire. Of course I've got my own bussiness, the Dry cleaning Laundry. And I think you said to me on the phone this morning you keep such crazy hours.

J: Yes, I talked to your secretary on the phone. And she said you were in the office from 4 to 11a.m. V: And, but, well, I get involved in all kind of projects around here. Like, I did this (indoor Pool) and the Green house. I do some art work. I've done Ceramics, I've done painting, I've done jewelry.

J: You've been busy, huh?

V: Yeah, I keep myself pretty busy, and I don't think I'll ever run out of things to do. And, if the opportunity ever came up where I could get back into govt. I probably would. I enjoy it. I feel that everybody that comes onto this Earth has to do something to justify his being here. And this was my justification, I feel for my being on this Earth, to run the city of Holland in a good manner. And giving my services to the people this way. Some people do this in other ways, and it's through the Churches, or Service Clubs or whatever that they wanted to do. And this is fine, I have no quarrel, but I think that everybody, you just
can't go floating through this life without some sort of a contribution to that world in which you live in. You don't have to make a great big splash but, you'd like to feel that you've made a little ripple somewhere along the line. At least that's my philosophy.

J: Is there anything about Holland, the community, or the systems we operate under that you don't particularly care for?

V: I'm pretty satisfied. Of, there's little minor things, but I mean Bassically I think this is as fine a community as a person could live in.

Now, I've been pretty much throughout the United States. I don't there is a section of the U.S. that I hav'nt visited.

S: Have you always lived in Holland?

V: I was born and raised in Holland. Educationally, after I graduated from High School, I went to Stanford for my Freshman year of college. I enjoyed it out there on the West Coast. It was beautifull out there. Then I went to Michigan State, and finished up at Michigan State. And, then I got married. And then World War II came along. I served some time with them. I was up in the Allucians for a year. I came on back home. And then eventually well, I got involved, I started out in the Jaycees. That's how I really got involved in community service I guess you would say. So then I finally got into the Council, and then the Mayor and that sort of stuff. Then after I got out of the Mayor's office I wanted something to do so I went up to Grand Rapids to the University of Michigan, and took some ceramic courses up there through their extension. Then I went down to Western and took a
bunch of art classes down there. And just kind of fussed around, but as I said I've traveled throughout pretty much of the U.S. I liked the San Francisco Bay Area Very much. Maybe that's just nostalgia from my days being at Stanford, I don't know. Another area I liked very much was down at Lexington, Kentucky. I think it's just beautiful down, in through there. I don't know if I want to live there.

Here in Holland, I don't like the cold Winters. Maybe some day my wife and I will move out of here and go to somewhere where it's warm yearround. We've kicked around the idea of going to Brownsville, Texas. I've never been to Brownsville. I've been to two places in Texas. I'd like to go down to Texas and just see what it's like. I don't like the East coast of Florida at all. That's too busy for me. And I don't want to be that involved in the husstle, busstle. If I did that I'd just as soon live in New York City, I suspect, which I don't like either.

But, I really enjoy Holland. I think there are really alot of wonderful people here. I enjoy the people. I've got roots here. My grandfather was the first boy born in the city of Holland, that survived after the city was founded, after A.C. Van Raalte came around here, you know. And, my Father was born and raised here. In fact, this property that this house was built on was part of my Grandfather's original farm in the State. So if you've got roots you kind of stay put I suppose.

I really enjoyed being Mayor. It isn't a sense of power. You don't have that. you are not govt.. I'll put it that way. You don't have any power as Mayor., really.

J: It's like a part time job, Right?
V: Well, it isn't even a part-time job. I happened to have devoted a lot of hours to it. I as Mayor couldn't have given a directive to any city employee. This is written into our Charter, which is a good protection for the employees of the city. If anything has to be done it has to be done through channels, through the Council. The Council can make a directive to the city manager, and the manager can in turn make a directive to the dept. heads, and so on and so forth, which is the way it should be. And, I couldn't tell the park dept. that they had to do this, or the Police Dept. that he had to do that. I had no authority whatsoever to do anything, which is good. You can't set somebody up as a King, and say well he's Mayor, he's got all the control. This isn't what the job is supposed to be. At least I didn't feel it was supposed to be that way. You with the other 6 or 8 members of Council developed the policy along with the city manager for the operation of the city. And really the mayor has no more authority than any other member of Council has. And they don't have any authority as far as employees are concerned, which is good. You can't set yourself up as a Nixon, or anything like that, you know, in the White House, or set yourself up as a king. Or maybe like Daley in Chicago. I had a lot of respect for Mayor Daley, I really did. I think he did a tremendous job for the city of Chicago. It's one of our few cities in our country that wasn't way in debt and everything else. I don't think he was ever on the take. He may have been, but I don't think that he was ever on the take. But, on the other hand he was all powerful too. When Dick Daley said something there, well, this is what it was. And that's all there was to it, which is probably all right up to a point. You
can't do that in the city of Holland which is fine. In a little town like this, you don't need that kind of power or authority.

J: Would you like to see Holland get bigger?

V: Not really. Not real big. I'd like to see it have a normal, good growth. Do you follow me? I would not like to see a General Motor plant come in here, that's going to employ 5,000 people that would come into the Holland area. I would like to see good growth, good industry. I think we have a good diversification of industry at the present time in Holland.

I was on the town Council at the time when G.E. came, or wanted to come in. And, the land where G.E. is at the present time was city owned land. There was some of the older industrialists who objected strenuously to the city selling that land to G.E. They said well what's this going to do to our wages, and so on and so forth. Of course there is a saying that in the furniture manufacturing towns "That a dollar a day and shavings."

END OF SIDE ONE OF TAPE

Not only have they contributed to the town in many ways, civic activities, church activities and so on. And one of the reasons G.E. selected Holland was the fact we have the college here, believe it or not. They liked the idea of having a college type of community. Now, I don't know how many G.E. kids attend Hope College, but I guess that's really besides the point, isn't it. I mean that's one of the reasons they came to Holland. Another reason they came to Holland was they liked the kind of community Holland was. They wanted to fit into the community. And they made an all out effort to do this. A lot of other industries, I would say that is one of the larger industries,
Beechnut has done the same sort of thing. Excelo has done the same sort of thing. That whole industrial park is like that. We have had some industry in the community that were not really an asset to the community. They imported; now I'm not setting myself up as a bigot; don't misunderstand what I'm going to say. They imported a lot of low skilled people to work in these factories. These factories fluctuated in their business greatly. And, as a result of this they had a tremendous on our welfare load, and so on. Now, I'm not talking about the Latinos either. I mean Heinz has brought a lot of the Mexicans in here. Or people of Mexican ancestry here. And really, I don't think that they have been detrimental to the community. There are a lot of them that have been real solid citizens in the community. And I think that some of these people feel that they are minorities, and that they are being picked on. I don't think that they really are being picked on. They certainly aren't being picked on in the Police Dept. At least I don't think that they are. They stay pretty much to themselves. They get into some fight among themselves, in the bars and taverns, and so on. But very seldom do they bother any of the non Spanish speaking people. I think that if you walked down any of the areas where there are predominately Mexican you would feel just as safe as if you were walking down the street here. At least I would. I wouldn't feel that way living in Detroit, Chicago, parts of New York City or even in Grand Rapids. I don't really think they've caused, yeah they've caused the Police problems, and I'm sure they're into drugs, but then a lot of the Whites are too, so what's the difference. They get drunk on Saturday nights, but I've known some whites that do that too.
Really I wouldn't want to see Holland grow like the World War II cities did, you know where they built a great big industrial plant, and then have all this coming. I think it would spoil the character of the community. I kind of like it. I don't want to see it stay forever at 25,000 or whatever it is at the present time. But, if you have a nice normal growth, and so on, and get some good people in the community. If your going to have a shop, you can't have all white collar workers. You have to have some guys who are willing to work in the shop as well as the executives. Really that's the backbone of industry. So, I don't know if that answered your question.

S: Do you have any suggestion's for future interviewees which we might consider for future reference?

V: Well if you get a chance, E.C. Brooks was a former Mayor of Holland. He lives out on South Shore. Ernie's getting along in years. He was a very close friend of my Father. And he was Mayor, and a former State Senator. He was director of Corrections for the State of Michigan. He was a democrat.