Heerspink, James Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Ann Paeth
JH: My name is James Heerspink. I was born in 1909 and raised at 148 W. 16th Street. I lived there until I was married. Then I was married, and to my first wife I was married for 17 years. She died of cancer. Then I was a widower for nine and a half years. Then I married Pearl Vanderweide, who was a girl from Roseland, Chicago. In the meantime, in 1931, my father died very suddenly. My mother lived on W. 16th Street at 148 and she didn’t have a means of support. I had just finished a course in watch repairing. I had jewelry experience, because I had worked for a manufacturer of jewelry products. So I opened up the front room of her house and I spent three years there serving the public on watch repairing and jewelry repairing. I always had an eye on going into business for myself, so I rented a building on Washington Square in 1935. I purchased that building, because the bank owned it, and they were quite anxious to get rid of it. So I made them an offer and I bought it. I was there ten years in that building at 450 Washington Square. I’ve seen Washington Square grow. All the merchants that were there at that time are not living anymore. Geerds had a shoe store there. Mr. Geerds passed away. I bought their building at 442 Washington Square. I was there 46 years. I had a total of 56 years in the jewelry business.

AP: When you had your store did you do repairs and sell...?

JH: Retail. Yes. I’ve seen the square from when I was a young boy. There was only
one store on 18th and Washington. That was owned by Pete Maas, the grocer. He eventually sold out to Dyke and Homstra. They built two buildings right next to it. One of them they put the dry goods store in, and the second one they rented out to French Pastry Bakery. They eventually moved to a downtown location. Harold De Loof was on the other side of the street in a drugstore, and he took over the building of the French Pastry Shop. Gradually, Washington Square started taking changes because of the ownership and different people running it. Anyway, Harold De Loof was there longer than I was. I was next door. Then Geers Shoe Store, I moved in there. Next door to me was Harry Doornbos, the meat market. He retired, and it was sold to Draper's, and Draper's had a meat market there. Eventually they sold out. There was a dry cleaner in there for a little while, but not long. Maxine's had a children's and maternity shop. Then you had the alley. First, when I came on the square, Henry Tysse had a radio shop there in the first building. Eventually that was taken over by Ruby when she bought the building I vacated. There was a dress shop in there before she got it. Next to Ruby's, Dr. VanAppledorn built an office there. He was there for three or four years. He also occupied the corner house. He sold that building and it was rented out to Dr. Moordyke for a while. Then Warm Friend Flowers was in there for a while after Moordyke left. The building of Dr. VanAppledorn was occupied by a bookstore for a while. This man from WHTC, he sold books there from the house on the corner, Ken Showers with the radio station. Going across the street, the end building was built later on, too. That was not one of the first ones on that side. There was a shoe repair shop in there. Eventually it
became a beauty shop. Next door to that was the beer store. Roy Young operated that. He was bought out by Pete Raffenaud. He ran it for a while with his son. Then he sold out, or he moved, to a building further down the block. It used to be owned by Vogelzang’s Hardware. That building had a radio shop in there for a while. Next to that was a barber shop. Ben Altena was in there. There was a beauty shop in the back part of it. Later it was operated by Gladys Steketee. Next to that was a Kroger store that was built in 1927 by Mr. Kanoila. The Kroger store was there many years, but supermarkets finally took their business away, and they closed it up. That building was owned by Patsy Fabiano. He owned the barber shop and the beauty shop, too. After Kroger moved out, the Schipper’s had a furniture store there for pretty close to ten years. Then they discontinued business. Before they occupied it, there was a little building there next to the alley. That was run by Barbara Jean Bakery. They were there quite a while. Finally he retired. Then we’re up to the alley. Ben Frens had a garage just across the alley. That was the first building on the other side of the alley. That eventually became a Mexican restaurant, which I think it is right now.

PH: Before it was a restaurant, Lakeshore Sewing had it.

JH: The next building was the one that Raffenaud took over for the beer store. That used to be Vogelzang’s Variety Store, but they never operated again after the fire they had there. Then we come to the corner building which was Vogelzang’s, which was destroyed by the fire. That was quite a shock for all of us. Two people died in that fire. This one boy that was in the basement, I saw him come running out of the
building. He was on fire. I knew him. He was Frank Volkema. I said, "Frank, get in here." He was headed for the doctor's office. And I patted the flames out of his clothes. His hair was all gone; he looked like a baked apple. He only lasted over night. He died the next day. That corner was taken over by the pizza place. First they had a gas station on the corner, then it became Little Caeser's Pizza. So that about the sum and substance of the square. I've been planning to write a history of the square, but so far I only have the introduction.

AP: It sounds like every possible business, at one time was in the square.

PH: There were more little stores in between there, too, that we'd have to think about. At one time, a chiropractor was on the square.

JH: Yes, that's right. But he wasn't there too long. They told me at one time there was a hat shop there, but it didn't last long.

AP: When and how did Washington Square really start to become that center for all the shops?

JH: That corner store was Pete Maas. Then Dyke and Hornstra took that over and built two buildings. Geerd's Shoe store was there, and Harry Doornbos was there, so there was a nucleus right there. Then Bill Thompson, he built a plumbing shop on the other end of the alley. Slickers and Kaashoek, they were brother-in-laws, they built a confectionery store the first building after the alley. That was taken over by John Marcus for a while. Then Tysse had it for a radio shop. John Swierenga was even in with Tysse. He ran a music store. He finally went out and worked for Meyer Music House.
PH: When were all the buildings completed on the square that it became one big square?

JH: When Ruby came in there with her dress shop, she took over the confectionery building and Tysse Radio Shop. When I went into that building, that was the building that Thompson built for his plumbing shop. That was, for a while it became an upholstery shop and a radio shop combined. Then Margo had her dress shop in there for a while, and they were in there for about three or four years. Then they sold out to Ruby. Ruby was there about nineteen years at least. We had an association for a while. We had meetings, and we asked for better lighting on the square, which we got. We got recognition from the public council for various things. We had a festival and blocked off the street. We had ethnic foods and instrumental music and so on. That went over big. In fact, the downtown copied us there for a while. They had the ethnic food festival there, too. So we had a lot of activity there. You can imagine, I was there 56 years, that's a long time.

PH: We put on sidewalk sales together, blocked off the street.

JH: Yes, sidewalk sales, we were all in cahoots in that. Of course, sidewalk sales are not as popular as they used to be. That kind of faded out, too. But we used to have, when I was first there in 1935 and 1936, we had an awful lot of snow in the winter time. Today, the city plows take care of it, and shove it into a pile. Pretty soon, another truck comes along and takes care of it. At that time we had to do our own shoveling in front of the stores. The WPA workers would come and they'd shovel that snow on trucks by hand. It's a lot different than it was today. Even then, we'd have a lot of fun in the morning. We would all be out there shoveling snow. There
was a general unity there. The proprietors were all of the same kind of people. They were all Dutch, in other words. We’d have coffee together, and Christmas parties. Every year we had a party of some kind. That Kroger store and Schipper’s Furniture store was finally taken over by Pereddies Restaurant, and they’re still there. De Loof sold out to Augie Overway. He put in Mutual Discount Drugs. He was there five or six years. Gretchen’s got the beauty shop there now. The building that Dyke and Hornstra built right next to the grocery store, they ran a dry goods store there. They were there quite a few years. That was taken over by VanderMaats for five or six years. Then Morie Dreizinga took over in 1949, and he didn’t do too well then. Maybe he was before VanderMaats, but he wasn’t there very long. He tried to make a five and dime out of it, but it didn’t work. So the square’s got a lot of history to it. The Vogelzang fire was something else. I turned in the alarm on that thing. It was tragic, really.

AP: How did it begin?

JH: There was a gasoline truck delivering gas there, because they had a pump outside where they sold gas. There were two intake pipes, and he hadn’t been there before, and he put the gas down the wrong intake pipe. It ran down the basement, and they had a paint machine working there, and that sparked and set the explosion off. When it happened, it just shook that building I was in. There was one sheet of flame going up the side of the building. In between the variety store and the hardware store, they had a paint store. They had cans of paint piled on shelves, and the paint buckets all burst open. It looked like a waterfall the way the paint spilled out. It was a tragic
fire. I saw the driver of that truck come out. He was a mass of flames. They rolled him over on the ground and put him in the ambulance, and he died that same night. Somebody hollered, "Get that truck out of here." Ike De Kracker was a policemen off duty, and he jumped in the truck and drove it over to the next block. That hose on the gasoline truck was burning yet. That could have been worse yet than what it was.

As far as my childhood is concerned, we had to make our own fun. We had an empty lot across the street from my house, and we’d play ball there with the neighborhood boys. We had to make our own fun. We’d go out in the woods and get a branch off of the tree to make a hockey stick out of, and for a puck we’d use a tin can, and we’d play hockey on the sidewalk. Today they have to have hockey sticks and hockey pucks to be official, but we had to make our own fun.

My neighborhood, when I was a kid, we had a lot of boys in our block, and two doors over from us was a bakery. I was quite friendly with those kids, and their dad would have us go in the back room and wrap bread with wax paper. You shove them through a machine that was heated on both sides. We’d each get a cream puff for that. They had two horses, and they would deliver baked goods as far as Jamestown and Forest Grove. They had a horse barn on Maple Avenue there, which was torn down afterwards. They suddenly decided the family wanted to move to California. So they discontinued the bakery business, tore the building down, but they were there for quite a while.

The Interurban... I used to spend the summers at my grandmother’s house,
south of Graafschap. I’d take the Interurban, and I’d board that on Maple and 13th, and they’d take you to Macatawa, and they’d make that circle around Macatawa there, come back, and switch the car to go to Saugatuck. It was eighteen cents to Macatawa. Then the conductor would come around, and I’d have to get off at Laketown Crossing. That was from Jenison Park to Laketown Crossing was twelve cents. So things were different in those days. I’d work on the farm hauling hay and grain and I picked strawberries and blackberries, so they kept me busy there. Later on, when I got a little older, the Interurban wasn’t running anymore, so I’d go take my bike and ride my bike to my grandmother’s house. That was about a six mile run.

One day, I was on the Interurban, and we were about in line with Castle Park, and the car jumped the track and cracked off two power poles. He made the curve too fast. They sent another car down to pick us up. It was quite an experience. I was sitting on the side that the power poles cracked off.

AP: Where did you go to school?

JH: I went to Christian school. Grade school on Central Avenue, in the wooden structure there. They had a brick building on 15th Street, that’s an apartment house now. I spent part of my schooling there. Then I was at Christian High, so I had my education there. Then I took an evening course from Holland business college, and I spent a year in Grand Rapids taking a watch course. That was right in the depression, ’31, ’32. I put a little ad in the paper: Watch and clock repairing, call for and deliver. I got phone calls one after another. I’d go on my bike, pick up a
clock, repair it, clean it, oil it, and bring it back to the customer for one dollar. One week I had thirty clocks, and I got had dollars, and I thought I was on top of the world. Thirty dollars was a lot of money in those days. The banks were closed then, and eventually opened up again. It all was tough going. Things were cheap, but you didn’t have any money to buy things. That was why, when I started a business down there, that was just the tail end of the depression. It was still rough going at that time. I had to really plug to make a success of it.

PH: But beside the watch repairing, he had jewelry and he had a gift section.

JH: I had a gift section and diamonds and jewelry retail. During the war, that’s when business really picked up. Everybody was working, and working overtime. The women started working in the defense plants. I’d open my store at 7:30 in the morning, and some of these guys that worked at night were standing at the door waiting for me. They wanted to buy something for their girlfriend. That was the crest of the wave, really.

AP: What would be a real popular gift at that time?

JH: Lockets. Oh boy, I sold more lockets. I went to Chicago and my supplier there said, "Jim, put in lockets, they’re going to sell." I said, "I don’t know." He said, "Take my word for it." So I bought, and I had more lockets than you could shake a stick at. I had a big drawer full, and my clerk who was working for me, when she saw what I did, she said, "How am I ever going to get rid of those?" I said, "You wait, we’ll get rid of them." I got rid of every last one. They just walked out of the place. That was the most popular thing at that time. Of course, that’s phased out,
too. Styles change. The diamond pendant became more popular afterwards, when people had more money. So I had fifty-six years of successful business, really. I never regretted it. I regret sometimes that I spent too much time with my business and not enough time with my family. I have four children, and now my children are all far away from me. One is in Jackson, one in California, one in the Netherlands, and one in Boston. So they only come home occasionally because of the distance.

We just had our two daughters home and grandson this past week. The ones from the Netherlands and California were here. The one in the Netherlands has been there twenty-three years. I've always liked my city. I've travelled to different cities, and I always say I'd rather live here any day. We've been to California, we've been to Florida, we've been to New York. I still like it the best here. Born and raised here, I guess that's why. I've noticed many times that people that move away eventually come back. A lot of people that have been in the service, when they came back from service, they settled down here. Some of them settled elsewhere, and finally they wind up here again.

AP: When you were still in business on Washington Square, did you see a change coming from small businesses to the big malls?

JH: I saw the transition of small retailers into the malls. They began to affect us, too. That was definitely a big change. People still patronized us, we had a lot of loyal customers, but we could notice there was a change after that. They depended on me for service more than anything else. These bigger stores with more money, and so on, they could show more stock and so forth. But they fell by the way side, too.
Witmark is gone, they overbought themselves. Being big isn’t always the answer, either. You can get a lot more personal service in a small business than a big business. They take more of an interest in you. This is what I miss now, since we’re out of business. You miss the people. We meet people on the streets all the time that say, "We miss you." Which is encouraging, and, "We wish you were still there." There comes a time when you have to quit.

The city has changed a lot. By the way, I road my bicycle a lot during the depression. I parked my bike one day when I had to go to the First State Bank, it’s the First of America now. I parked it on the side of the building, and I came out and picked up my bike and went to College and 15th Street. I had to pick up a clock there. This woman said, "My brother just called me. The bank is being held up." I was parked there with my bike, and these robbers were parked with their car with their machine guns right there. I would have been in cross fire if I had stayed just a little bit longer.

The whole town has changed tremendously. Of course, Ed Prince has been responsible for the changing of downtown. Like I say, the Interurban used to be one of the big features that went to Grand Rapids. It went right over 8th Street, then over River, then 13th, and out of the city. So that was a big change when they discontinued that. The whole downtown has changed because of the malls, too. Penny’s moved to the mall, Fox Jeweler’s moved to the mall, Steketee’s moved to the mall. Now the shopping at downtown is mostly little shops, art stores and so on. That’s a big change from what it used to be. Vogelzang’s had a furniture store there.
Before that it was Montgomery Ward's. The whole situation has changed. The merchants have changed. There used to be McLellan store on the corner of Central and 8th. On this side was Woolworth Five and Dime. All those places have changed now. Fox Jeweler used to be on the corner there. They moved to the mall. The services in the city are much better than they used to be. They do more for the citizens than what they used to do. To me, the city is a lot cleaner than it used to be. They make a point to clean the streets and so on. When I was a kid, 16th street was gravel, 17th Street was gravel, 15th Street was gravel. All that has changed. The streets have been paved over the years. Washington Avenue used to be First Avenue before they changed the name. So there’s a tremendous lot of changes around.

There never used to be a bowling alley in town. They’re on Central and 9th Street. They never had bowling alleys. (tape ends)

...business course, and I worked with Klassen Printing Company. I was there for about four years. Then I went into the manufacturer jeweler place, and I learned the jewelry trade. The depression got so bad that there were thirteen of us working and it finally boiled down to two people. Then I took my watch course in Grand Rapids, and it all worked out eventually.

AP: What do you think of the city now? What do you think of the size of it?

JH: Well, it certainly has been growing. sometimes I wonder where it’s going to grow. Of course, we’re not part of the city, this is Allegan County that we’re in. But if I was part of the city, I think I’d worry a little bit about the fact that they’re spending so much money, like $10,000 here and $5,000 there. It just seems like there’s no
end to it. It all points to higher taxes. It think that’s going to be hard on the people, just common labor, is going to have a hard time owning a home and paying taxes on it. That too has changed. The banks finance these new homes that are being built. They seem to take a chance on those. I used to know a person who had people who didn’t pay their loan on their car. He said to me, "I can’t understand it. I had to go to Greenville the other day to pick up a car because it wasn’t paid for." The fellow was so mad that he shot at him. He said, "What happens? Two weeks later the bank loaned him some more money to buy another car, and he didn’t have the other one paid for." Things are so different today.

AP: Do you think it’s different today because a lot of people haven’t gone through a depression or a war where we’ve had to ration?

JH: The younger generation doesn’t know what the depression is like. Some friends of ours were in church and I was talking to one of their boys, and I asked him where he was in high school, and he was a sophomore. I said to him, "One thing is sure, you don’t know anything about the depression." He said, "We’re just starting to study about that now in the history book." I said, "I’m glad they got it in the history book, I didn’t think they even bothered to put it in there." Just to give you an example, this vacuum cleaner guy, Wabeck, he lived out in north Holland in the depression. There’s a Peck’s drugstore on the corner of 8th and River, that’s now the Reader’s World. They had a special on ice cream cones, two for a nickel. He, with his three kids, and he was unemployed and had it hard going, but he wanted his three kids to have an ice cream cone. So they walked from north Holland to River and 8th to get
an ice cream cone. You see what the depression meant to people. Of course, they
didn’t have things organized the way they should at that time yet to take care of the
poor. They really had a lot of people that would be on welfare now if they were in
the same condition that they were then. There were a lot of problems in those days
of how to finance a city. But I think the city is spending too much money. This
proposition of Windmill Island, that, to me, is a big venture they shouldn’t even
touch. There’s a lot of difference of opinion where that new area center should be.
The mayor and council is pushing for the 7th Street location, over the GE location. I
don’t think they’re going to settle that right away either.

I remember when the first radio station, WHTC, came into town. That was
quite a change for Holland. Speaking of radio, I remember when I was about 17 or
18 years old, Geerd’s Electric was operating on River Avenue at that time. They had
the radio sets in the store. They would let people listen with headphones. We
stopped in there one time, another fellow and I, and that was the first time I ever
heard a radio. That was something new. Then we got them in the homes. That was
a lot different than it is today. They had three dials, and you had to keep tuning the
three numbers alike, and they’d say, "I think I’ve got them now," and finally you’d
get the station. Then, of course, that was all different than what they did afterward.
Now they’ve got a remote for television. The first television I saw was in Chicago at
the World’s Fair in 1933. So I’ve lived through all that, and seen all these
developments over the years. It’s been very interesting. Now I see the
transformation in that people like ourselves... After I got married, I bought a house
on 18th Street right near the square. I’ve seen these neighborhoods go down. They aren’t going down as fast now because the city seems to have taken an interest in rehabilitating some of these homes, which I think is a good thing. Some of these places were getting worse. Like Washington Square had that stabbing there. That gave them a black eye for a while. People thought it was a war zone.

But all these paved streets in Holland, they used to be nothing but gravel. I remember when a fellow came around the neighborhood with a petition to pave 16th Street. My dad wouldn’t sign it. He said, "What’s wrong with our street now?" He couldn’t see it. They paved it eventually. The paving process then was a lot different than it is now. The initial process would be to remove all the old gravel, put in curbing, and then they would put in these big white stones, and the steam roller would come in and roll that thing back and forth for days to get that good and solid. Then they would come with the asphalt. We kids used to love to watch, they were all negroes, and they’d come with this hot asphalt and dump it, and these negroes would be leveling it. Finally the steam roller would come and smooth it out. Today, one truck takes care of all of it. The truck rolls along and the street is paved as they go along. Like I started to say about the people, they’re moving today into condos, and they never did that before. People with large families go into these older homes. The seniors, they go into a condo like we’re in now, which is more convenient because there’s less work, no yard work, snow shovelling is taken care of. So that’s the secret of condo living.

AP: Maybe as a final question, what things are you most thankful for about Holland, or
what things do you most appreciate about living here?

JH: Well, for one thing, you can find a peaceful neighborhood. All the neighborhoods are not as peaceful as this one is. But the fact that you have a choice of living with a group of people that are all the same caliber that you are, have the same interests that you have, that’s the purpose of living in a small city. Of course, this city is not small anymore, it’s getting bigger right along, but I’m grateful for what the city has done for me, since I was born and raised here. In those days, the doctors would come to your house and make house calls. Today they don’t do that. They say, "Take a couple aspirin and see me in the morning." Otherwise, go to the hospital if it’s an emergency. That’s been a big transformation. But I always appreciated the city here. I wouldn’t care to live anywhere else.

PH: Well, the city has been good to you and the people have been good to you when you were in your business.

JH: I’ve always appreciated our clientele in the store. We tried to please them, and they, in turn, were fine to us. We always appreciated the interest they showed in us. We, in turn, showed interest in our customers. During the war especially. These people would come in that had sons in the army. We’d always show an interest: "How’s Joe doing in the army, where is he now, how is he doing?" It took a lot of time to talk about it, but it paid off. At that time during the war, very few salesmen called on us because gas was rationed and they couldn’t travel. So we had to go into Chicago to buy. We were always appreciative of the people we served. Some people criticize Holland for various things, but I don’t feel that way. I feel they have been
good to me, so why should I complain. But I am concerned they spend so much money on projects that I think sometimes they could do without. One thing, when they are checking into a new project, they right away have to get somebody in from far away or some big city in an advisory capacity. There’s plenty of smart people here in town to take care of that. they don’t have to spend $150,000 for somebody to come and estimate on this or that. But that’s the way it is. That’s the way they do it. I think that there is a tendency in any government, city government, county government, there’s always a tendency to spend other people’s money. But eventually it all goes on the tax bill.

AP: Are there any other things that we should talk about that we haven’t talked about yet?

PH: Well, you could mention that one time you were awarded the small businessperson...

JH: Oh, I was awarded Small Businessman of the Year from the Chamber of Commerce in 1989. The committee that visited and interviewed me thought I was worthy of it. I didn’t think that I was. (laughs) They awarded me with a plaque, and I had to make a speech at the Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Churches have changed considerably. The whole attitude of the people has changed. The young people want contemporary services, and the older people want more conservative. That’s where a lot of changes have been made. Churches have separated and split on account of it. Our church experienced that. We built the Providence Church, and they had quite a struggle with that. The greater share of them separated from our church, and they call it Ridgepoint, now. They separated from the denomination.
AP: Well, are there any last things?

JH: I can't think of anymore. I covered about 56 years of my business and part of my childhood.

AP: Then we probably can just wrap it up. Thank you very much.

JH: You're welcome.