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## Kleinheksel, Victor Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

John Maassen

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Oral History Interview with  
Victor Kleinheksel

Conducted July 31, 1997  
by John Maassen

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
Interview with Victor Kleinheksel  
July 31, 1997  
Interviewer: John Maassen

JM: Vic, it's a pleasure to be here this afternoon to share with you what you've experienced over these last fifty years as we think in terms of the Sesquicentennial of Holland and of the church that both of us are members of, First Reformed Church. I wonder if you could tell me, Victor, when were you born?

VK: [date removed], 1929.

JM: Where?

VK: In Holland, Michigan, at Holland Hospital.

JM: And your mother's name was?

VK: Serena Topp Kleinheksel.

JM: And your father?

VK: Julius Kleinheksel.

JM: He's still living, isn't he?

VK: He's living; he's 93 years old.

JM: Then you have two brothers?

VK: Two brothers. Carrow of Holland and Randy of Holland.

JM: And both of them are associated in your business?

VK: Yes, they're both in business with me.

JM: Your wife, of course, is Dorothy and how did you happen to meet her?

VK: Dorothy's family went to First Reformed Church and our family lived right across the

street from the First Reformed Church all these years, and we were members there. I was baptized at First Reformed Church. And my wife was baptized at First Reformed Church. Through the years, through Junior CE and so on we knew each other, but it wasn't until we got in high school that we really seriously began to know each other. We were married in 1950.

JM: You were also married in First Reformed Church.

VK: Married in First Reformed Church. Right.

JM: Must have been traumatic to have that old building torn down (laughs).

VK: Yes! Rev. Bastian Kruithof married us at that time. We have some fond memories of CE days, and years before that when I was a young boy I can remember going to the Thursday night prayer meetings in the church at that time when James Wayer was there. James Wayer baptized both my wife and I.

JM: As you look back across the history of First Church what pastors particularly stick in your mind?

VK: Rev. Kruithof, of course, and Rev. Gosselink. I guess I would have to say all of them pretty much took a general part in our...

JM: Those were there in your formative years probably.

VK: Right.

JM: I remember the Kruithofs too. My wife worked for Bastian Kruithof. You have some children, would you tell us about them, please?

VK: Conrad is our oldest boy. He works for Prince Corporation and has been with them for several years. He's in the sales, I guess, he's kind of worked his way up through.

He's a manager with the Ford group.

JM: Then you have...

VK: Craig Kleinheksel who is with me in the funeral business, and he is manager of our Mulder Chapel here on Thirty-Second Street.

JM: And any others?

VK: Our daughter, Julie. It's Julie Ann Weeldreyer and her husband's name is Brian and they've been married now for three years. This is her second marriage. He is an architect and they live in Steaders Borough which is Holland-Zeeland area you should say.

JM: You went to Holland High School. When did you graduate?

VK: In 1947. We're having our 50th anniversary this year, this coming Saturday.

JM: Was that where you began to your interest in the trumpet? The band?

VK: Oh, I started that in the grade school already. I went to the old Froebel School which no longer stands. The Science Building is now on that part. I had a director named Stuart Ludlow. Started there in the fourth grade playing trumpet. Went through East Junior High School, Junior High bands, Senior High bands and I was an assistant conductor the last year of senior high school for the senior high school band.

JM: Was Eugene Heeter in your history too?

VK: Oh yes. Eugene was our director.

JM: I remember him also from high school.

VK: Then Arthur Hills came in and I graduated. He was the director at the time I graduated.

JM: Then you went to Hope College?

VK: Then I went to Hope College for two years.

JM: Took a general liberal arts...?

VK: Right, on the science side you might say. Chemistry and science courses there.

JM: And then you went to?

VK: Wayne State University, and I graduated from that with a mortuary science degree in 1953.

JM: Then of course you came back home to your family business?

VK: That's right.

JM: Tell me about your family, first of all in terms of your history. You showed me something here but sketch it out a bit. I know that your Dutch (laughs).

VK: Well, the Kleinheksels came across with...my grandfather did...came across with the early settlers shortly with Rev. Simon Bolks, with that group. And the way I understand actually that my grandfather was born very shortly after they came here. I had thought he came across with the boys, but that is not true. He came across with his parents and was born here in the United States very shortly. His mother must have been pregnant when they were coming across. They settled in the Overisel area, were members of the Overisel Reformed Church. My dad was a member there and grew up in the church, and my mother who was a Topp, Henry Topp, grew up and baptized and went to that church also.

JM: It's interesting how your family has stayed together in one locale pretty much.

VK: Yes they did. And that is very true. Of course, now when the five brothers came

across, three of them stayed in this neighborhood but two of them went on to the South Dakota area and Iowa and settled there. And they have a reunion over there as well as we have a Kleinheksel reunion which we just had this past year here. I can't tell you what number it is.

JM: Your grandfather came to Overisel. Did he engage in farming?

VK: There used to be a creamery. And he was a butter maker for some years at the Fillmore Creamery. Before that time he worked in a basket...what my father called a willow factory, in Holland when he was a young person. Then he went to the Fillmore Creamery and then later on in his life he bought a farm just about in the village of Overisel. And that farm still exists today. Still in the Kleinheksel family really.

JM: What brought him to Holland...or wasn't it your grandfather came to Holland, it was your father, wasn't it?

VK: It was my father that came to Holland. His brother Harvey graduated from Holland High School, went on to the University of Illinois and got his doctorate there, and then came to teach at Hope College. While at Hope, he had met Ethel Dykstra whose father was a funeral home owner here. And they later were married after he was out of school. My dad, when he got done with school, he had a car company. They had a garage, a repair shop, in Overisel. Then he was asked to go to Grand Rapids and he worked for the International Harvester Company as a mechanic for a few years. That was about the time that automobiles were coming out. Mr. Dykstra had one of the first automotive funeral coaches in this area. We have a paper notice from

the Holland Sentinel. It was listed that the enterprising funeral director, Mr. John Dykstra, had purchased a new mechanized funeral coach, and there were funeral directors that came from Lansing and Grand Rapids to see this new car. Well, when they had these new cars at that time, there were a lot of problems and my dad was hired by the funeral home to be a mechanic. That's how he started as a mechanic for Mr. Dykstra.

JM: The relationship was between the Dykstra family and your Uncle Harvey?

VK: That's right. And then what happened after two years Mr. Dykstra said, "Well, we want you to go back to school and get your funeral director's and embalmer's license." And my dad did that in 1928 I believe or '27, - something like that. And I believe today he holds one of the oldest funeral director's license in Michigan!

JM: How have the requirements for such a license changed through the years from your father to today?

VK: Greatly! (Laughs) He went to a man named Larry Brown in Greenville who had a school that he taught the necessary things that you had to have to become a licensed funeral director and embalmer. It was one day a week that my dad went up there and then he had to take an exam by the Michigan board at that time. And at that time you could just get either a funeral director's license which some people did, or you could get an embalmer's license, or you would have to take enough to get both licenses. And that's what my dad did at that time. So he was both an embalmer and a funeral director licensed.

JM: How long did that take him? Of course, he was doing it part time, wasn't he?



VK: He was doing it part time. I think that took almost a year at that time if I recall.

JM: Now, in contrast, when you came along you had a much more formal education.

VK: Yes. We had to have two years of college, 60 hours of college credit and we had to have prescribed courses that we took. Some chemistry and some accounting and English and kind of a pre-science course.

JM: And there was a business aspect of it also? You took courses in accounting, grief counseling and that sort of thing?

VK: Yes. First we had to have sixty hours of college, then we had to take an apprenticeship, and then go to school. I went to Wayne State - that was a full year course. Then at the end of the time you could take an national licensing, which was good in most of the states, or you could just take a Michigan and get just a Michigan license. I took the national science.

JM: Now, should your grandson decide to go into the business, what would be different for him in terms of preparation?

VK: He's going to have a regular college degree, that's going to come before he starts, and then go to a mortuary school.

JM: That would have to be a degree that is heavy in science?

VK: I'm not up on that. I don't know, but they want them to have a degree now because it's more complex.

JM: It's almost a graduate degree then, isn't it?

VK: Right, yes.

JM: That's interesting. Now getting back to that old car...I'm a car buff. What was that

car like, that early funeral coach?

VK: That was an old Ford. It was made by Ford, and of course a wooden body on the back with carved...I would say, it would look like a station wagon pretty much up to date with what you can remember the Model T station wagon, only it had a carved body. Then it had places for candles on the top.

JM: A longer wheelbase, no doubt?

VK: Right. Stretched wheelbase.

JM: I'd like to stay with your business for a while. Obviously, with the growth of Holland, your business has grown. Tell me about what the business was like when your father started, and then move on from that point to where you are now or where you were when you started. Give us a bit of the development of that if you will.

VK: At the time, Mr. Dykstra was living when my father started. In 1936 he passed away. So actually that was quite a short time. There was a man also working for the funeral home by the name of Gilbert Vande Water; he started when he was sixteen years old. At that time we didn't have medical examiners, we had coroners. Mr. Vande Water ran...that was a public office that you ran for...

JM: You did not have to be a doctor.

VK: No. And he was a coroner for many years. But then there was a doctor that ran for coroner right after that, and he was in for a few years. But then later it became a medical examiner and it had to be a chief medical examiner with other medical examiners working under him. Mr. Vande Water died in 1952, I think it was, or '54, maybe it's '54, shortly after I started. And at that time, my father started

running the business. Some years later, 1966, our family purchased the funeral home from the Dykstra family.

JM: The name has always been the same from the very beginning?

VK: Yes, it was incorporated as the Dykstra Funeral Home so we could keep that name even though the Kleinheksels were owners.

JM: Did you say it started in 1900?

VK: That's right. 1900.

JM: Was it the only funeral home in town at that time?

VK: No, there were four funeral homes in the town at that time. Later the others all joined together and then there were just the two which there is today.

JM: That seems to be the story of this industry too - consolidation. Even the smallest villages once had their funeral directors. That's no longer true, is it?

VK: It's just too hard. The costs - the buildings, the employees...everything...it's just like your small grocery store, corner grocery or gas station. You just would go out of business today. You either had to grow or you just couldn't make it.

JM: I notice for example, at least in the larger cities where we've lived that often they don't even own their own hearses. They rent them.

VK: That's true.

JM: Now, that may not be true here but...

VK: Well, I think the smaller funeral homes in Grand Rapids probably all rent their hearses. However, for us with the number of funerals we do, it's better for us financially to own our own.

JM: Thinking in terms of the industry with which you are...Of course, you've always worked very closely with churches. Prior to going on with that subject however I would assume that you were almost born in a funeral home, is that correct?

You were born in the hospital, but you were reared in a funeral home, right?

VK: Right next door.

JM: I was raised in a parsonage right next door (laughs).

VK: Right. Just like that. We were part of everything that went on.

JM: So that you were aware from the very word go and no doubt your father's position had an impact on how you behaved and so on.

VK: How true - all the time. Or how we dressed. In those days, funeral homes, part of their business was an ambulance business, and probably for advertisement reasons. That was a big part of it. That was a big part of our life at that time because we had to be on call. We would have about three or four people that were full time employees. We had to be home with the ambulance to go on these calls whenever they came. What we did was hire students. We had sometimes one or two students. We had rooms upstairs in the funeral home and they stayed in these rooms and they assisted with the ambulance calls while they were in their college or seminary...we had many seminary students.

JM: Several I may know.

VK: Yes, that's right.

JM: I saw you talking to Chester Toren recently...

VK: He was one that stayed up there. And there were several through the years.

JM: There were no such things as paramedics in those days?

VK: No, that came in much, much later. I remember our men all had to go to school.

They went to Grand Valley at that time or to Butterworth Hospital. Dr. Vasoo was a heart man and really pushed for having everybody go to school who were working on ambulances.

JM: Was that considered to be a rather plum position for many of those young men, or how did they feel about? All depended upon the individual I suppose.

VK: Emergency medical technician was a nice name. They never got paid what it was. I think most people liked the position because it was very interesting. But it wasn't something they could live on just being an EMT.

JM: We were starting to talk about your relationship with churches. In the early years, what was the relationship with the churches? How did services, locations, interments and all of that, how was that taking place and how has that changed through the years?

VK: Well, that has gone in cycles, I think. At the time when I first started, some of the funerals we would start in the home. Quite often we would bring the person that had passed away to their own home. As I hear my dad speaking about it, he talks about when a person dies at night, see, they would leave the funeral home, go to the house and maybe I'm going in this very strongly, explicitly, but they'd take the bed down in the bedroom and move all the furniture. They would do their embalming right in the home. Then they would come back the following day and bring the casket to the home and the person would be viewed right in the home. Then we'd have the first

service in the home and then the family would get in the cars and go to the church and have a service in the church. Then they would go from the church and go to the cemetery and the bell would toll for every car that left for the cemetery (I'm thinking of the Overisel Reformed Church when I hear that). I remember the days myself of the tolling of the bell as each car would leave the church.

JM: First time I saw a dead body was when I had to toll the bell in North Holland at the age of twelve.

VK: Okay. You remember that, and those are some of the things in those days that happened. I would say in later years, of course, they started to use the funeral home. We had the viewing the funeral home. But most of the people that were church members would go to the churches and have the services in the church. We would use the funeral home sometimes. But basically in this area, I guess I can regard it as this area, most of the people would go to the church for services. Then following that, probably starting in the seventies, we had less and less funerals in the church and more of them in the funeral homes.

JM: Which meant that you had to do some remodeling and rebuilding in your facilities.

VK: We had to make bigger chapels and modernize, yes. It was a change. We had to be able to hold more people. And now, I would say in the last ten years maybe, we've got a shift of going back to the churches again. I'm sure that we have more church services now than we had ten or fifteen years ago.

JM: Any idea why that may be so?

VK: I think the ministers felt that the place for the person to have the funeral was in the

church. That was their church home and I think there was a push on that type of thing. If the minister was asked he would say, "Well, we would like to have that in the church."

JM: I have sensed that if you were particularly a pious member you would be more likely to be expected to have your service in the church than in the funeral home.

VK: I feel that way.

JM: In fact, it got to the point of where are you going to have an auditorium large enough for some of these problem funerals?

VK: Yes. Let's speak about today. We had a young person that was fatally injured and we used the Wesleyan Church because it seats about 1100 now. We probably had 750 or 800 people at that service. And it's nice that we could go. They graciously let the family use that because of the number of visitors.

JM: When you had a visitation in the home, were you still pretty much in charge? Was that a little different than in the funeral home? After all, you were in somebody else's home at that point.

VK: Yes, usually they had some member of the family that would meet the people at the door when they would come. They also would have a badge on the front door of flowers, or actually an imitation badge at that time, later it became flowers. You would put that up on the front door so people would know that was the house where there would be a wake there.

JM: Now, in terms of interment. Obviously you've had funerals all over the county pretty much, right? In most of the churches, most of the cemeteries, all of them I suppose.

There are cemeteries now that are virtually closed, there are others that are opening. Want to tell us a little bit about some of that?

VK: In my time, my great-great grandfather is buried in a little cemetery in Overisel. They still keep it up but there are no burials there any more. They later moved and started a new cemetery where they had more property and could use it. That's one that is closed. But it's well kept up yet. Once in a while I'll just check that out just because it's our relation. It was a funny thing. I guess we've become more interested in our family genealogies. My dad lived in Overisel and Fillmore and Holland, and yet didn't know his grandfather was buried in the little cemetery that was closed up there.

JM: Is that right!

VK: And I was really surprised at that being a funeral director. But he just never knew that. I can't believe that my grandpa didn't say something about it. My grandmother was a Kooops, but she died when my dad was seven years old and Harvey was nine years old at that time. So maybe grandmother didn't have time to say those things to them.

JM: How have customs at the graveside changed? Or haven't they?

VK: Not a lot. Probably a shorter service. I would say the types of songs today have changed greatly.

JM: Would you sing at the graveside?

VK: We have people sing all kinds of songs at the graveside (laughs). Not always religious either. I mean, that's it and I guess even in the funeral home. I think of a



time in the last couple of years that the man was a composer and we had very loud guitar, very loud music - entirely different than you would think. That was their choice. He was an upbeat person and that was the kind of music he liked and that's what he wrote and that's what we listened to. And the music in our churches have changed just about the same. I guess at funerals it would be about the same way.

JM: It seems to me that there is more hymn singing at funerals than there used to be.

VK: Yes, that's true.

JM: It seemed almost not to be right to be singing a hymn. Now we look at it more victoriously and we sing more hymns.

VK: That's true. I would say that we probably sing hymns more often in funerals now than not.

JM: It was also the custom in my early years to really use the liturgy in the worship service. In other words, you had a message but you read a lot of scripture. I suppose that varies a great deal according to the pastor today.

VK: That's right.

JM: Services are of varied length? Or have they cut down in length?

VK: I'm going to speak for today. We had a service this morning. A graveside first and then we had a service at the funeral home later. But the family alone was at the graveside. One of the sons, not a minister, conducted that service himself.

JM: At the graveside.

VK: At the graveside. And said some nice things. But also said some things that were pretty hard, I thought. But it was a nice service, and the other son offered a very

nice prayer afterwards.

JM: I suppose that one would think that when you go to a service you are being very objective. In other words, you don't listen much to what's going on. You're only concerned about the externals and so on. I know you well enough to think that probably is not true, Vic. But at the same time, how do you feel about that? I mean you go to hundreds and hundreds of them.

VK: By the time it comes to the message part, we've gotten all the things that we have to do and lined up, and how we're going to dismiss, and how many people we have, and how the family would like to have dismissal, and if we have to make an announcement of if the minister is going to make the announcements, those things. We do that once the funeral starts. But by the time we get to all those little duties that we do ourselves, then that's about the time the minister is preaching the sermon. So I really hear a lot of different services. Yes.

JM: I think back to my experience in other communities in regard to funerals, particularly in larger cities, especially the last years in California. I have heard some terrible organ playing in many funeral homes! I assume that Holland is not like that because Holland has so much talent.

VK: I like to think that it isn't at least! (Laughs)

JM: I have heard terrible music! (Laughs)

VK: I think we've had thirty good organists. All of them that we have had had very good ratings. We had Mrs. John Tibbe who passed away two years ago. She played in Harderwyk Church and played very good music.

JM: Organ players are hard to find in today's world in many areas.

VK: This is true. Well, that hasn't been much of a problem I don't think. The woman who plays in our church, her son just sang...

JM: Yes. Linda Hakken.

VK: I should know that because one of the boys of Hakken at one time also stayed at our funeral home and helped when he was in college. She helps us out. We just have a good group of organists.

JM: We've only touched on the fact that you've been raised next door to a funeral home. Obviously your profession and your father's profession was very visible. Obviously the butt sometimes of some pretty bad humor. Yet, you yourself have pursued the profession. Your children have. Tell us about that, if you will.

VK: Well, I like to think this is the way it is. I hear people that say, "I can't wait until I retire." I'm now sixty, I'll be sixty-eight next week, and I'm not ready to retire. I still go to work every day. I enjoy my work. I like the people. I think we get probably closer to families that we're dealing with at the time of death than you can at any other time. And when a person comes up to you afterwards and just thanks you and tells you you've made it as easy as possible for you, it's gratifying.

JM: So, from your perspective that's the most important element?

VK: Yes, that's it. The fact that I can go down the street and see this person and this person and this person, and you don't say anything about it, but you've worked in their families and they never forget you.

JM: Could you list four or five truly prominent people in this community that you've had

services for?

VK: Well, I guess, Mayor Steffan years ago, the priest of the Catholic Church. I guess when you get my age those names get away from you. The man that operated the car ferry; we had his services. We had a man in the paper today that is senator in Illinois and when you see all the things he's done. his children are all lawyers and so on.

JM: Did you have Ed Prince?

VK: No, we did not have Ed Prince.

JM: That brings up the fact that there is a tendency, I understand, for those who are of the Reformed Church in America to go to the Dykstra Funeral Home and the Christian Reformed Church people go to...(laughs)

VK: I shouldn't have that on record, but through the years that has changed an awful lot. But, yes. I went to the public school and I knew a lot of people in the public schools. And our competitors, almost all of them, went to the Christian schools.

JM: That may be the reason that they did that. The second thing I think of when I think of you is the trumpet, and I saw you play in the band just night before last. What started you in the trumpet at such an early age?

VK: I wanted to play trombone. (Laughs). So we went to the school, grade school, and I can remember that, the old Froebel School which is gone. Mr. Ludlow was the teacher there and I just wanted that trombone. And he said, "Oh man", he said, "a trumpet would be a lot better for you or a coronet."

JM: Why were you interested in the first place in an instrument? Did you have a musical family?

- VK: My mother played the piano. Behind every good student is a pushy mother!
- (Laughs). And I must say my mother was, "You must practice, you must practice, you must practice." She would sit down some of the time and we would play. I played from an early age. I played in churches, just simple..."The Holy City"...I have a big old trumpet on my mantel on some red velvet and I have "The Holy City"...I played that "Holy City" at so many places and that was through my mother's doing. I must give her the credit. I went to Overisel and played at the Fourth of July, and I won first place and received three dollars and bought a speedometer for my bicycle. I can remember that.
- JM: You did a lot of solo work then.
- VK: I did a lot of solo work in those days, yes. And then as we grew older, we had a trumpet trio. I don't know if you know Dick Ruch, but Dick was the CEO of Herman Miller, and Dr. Robert Albers who was a medical doctor in Holland and myself, we were a coronet trio. Mr. Hills and we played in Menominee, Michigan, and at Interlochen, and we were asked to come as a trio to Interlochen. We played with the All-State Band at that time.
- JM: Where were you in school at that time?
- VK: We were juniors and seniors in Holland High School at the time we were asked. We played in the state music festival. Dr. Ravelli was the judge and we were the only coronet trio that received a first division under him. So we were very proud of it. That's why we were invited to Interlochen, because of him too.
- JM: You never went to an Interlochen Music Camp, however?

VK: Twice. And we went there this week to hear the Interlochen group this year. It's kind of like old home.

JM: Then, of course, you got into bands. I suppose you played in orchestras as well?

VK: Yes. The Hope College Orchestra, played for the Messiah, played the trumpet solo. Played that for, I think, three years at Hope College. I did that after I came back from school a couple of years.

JM: Hope's marching band has never been as big a thing as...

VK: No, but I did play in that marching band! Under Professor Morrette Rider, a very nice man. He was really an orchestra man. At that time we had the band and we marched for a couple football games.

JM: The number of Tulip Time parades you've been in has been beyond number, no doubt.

VK: Yes, that started in the fourth grade already. And I only had one Tulip Time parade that I didn't march in all those years until now! That's when I was hit and had my broken hip. And then I rode on a cart and played in it.

JM: You were in it but you didn't march?

VK: That's right.

JM: That is remarkable! Now that would be the Parade of Bands?

VK: The Saturday parade, the Parade of Bands. In the early days we played for the Thursday parade, and when we were in the Holland High School band, we played for every parade.

JM: You've played in trios then later you played at Interlochen and you played with the

Holland High School band, the Hope College Marching Band, the Hope College orchestra - have you ever thought of pursuing that as a profession?

VK: I taught private lessons from my first year in college until about 1980, and had several students - some that went on and were teachers. I have quite a few of those students that I run across now that are also playing in the American Legion Band.

JM: It seems to me quite remarkable, maybe it's because I dropped my coronet so early, but for a person like yourself to be still playing the trumpet and doing it so well at your age, that is unusual. A person must take it seriously to continue with it all through the years as you have. You must really enjoy it.

VK: Well, I still enjoy it. I enjoy the concerts. I look forward to Tuesday nights for the American Legion Band.

JM: Are there other instruments that you play?

VK: No, just the trumpet.

JM: Tell us about the American Legion Band. How did you get involved with it?

VK: I started during the war years. They were short of trumpets and this same trumpet trio of Dick Ruch, Bob Albers and I were all in high school. And they needed people to play to keep the band because most of these, when they got to be seniors, would have to go to service. So they didn't have many young people in the band. We were asked by Mr. Kissenger at the time, or actually, it was Mr. Heeter at that time, to come in and play. We were playing in the High School Band. We started at that time and I just continued all through the years and then a lot of the service boys that were in service came back. We went to the Chicagoland Music Festival one year.

We were still in high school when we went to the Chicagoland Music Festival.

JM: Did you start the trend for having younger people in that band or was that always true?

VK: I would say yes. At that time we did. As the band grew in years, we had more and more people who had just graduated would come in the band.

JM: A good way for them to maintain their skill.

VK: That's right. They'd come back from college and play, and today we have a lot of directors in the band, college personnel in the band.

JM: The American Legion aspect is only traditional at this point in history.

VK: That's right. You do not have to be a member of the American Legion to be in the band. We are a band and the City of Holland sponsors us.

JM: Has the type of music changed through the years?

VK: Yes. In fact, I like to say in the last three or four years we've gone to more...not as many overtures and...We've gone more to easy listening, more of a pops concert, I would think. A pops concert in the park is what we are really doing at this time.

JM: What do you think brought that about? Because you've had the same director all these years!

VK: I know. I think people asking for that type of music today.

JM: And being more aware of it too probably.

VK: That's right. When they come to the park in the summer time they're in leisure clothes, they're there for "easy listening," and I think that's basically the people we are talking about. We have some good musicians that come. We had a great singer



this year. But I think we are doing more musicals. Marches are liked very much by people and a little...not quite so tough a music, I guess you would say.

JM: Now, how have the attendances changed? The age of the people? Is it a different kind of event now than it was?

VK: We have more directors in the band now than we ever had from other schools.

JM: I meant attendance in terms of the crowds.

VK: Oh, we're drawing from a much bigger area. We have people from Otsego. We have people from Allegan. We have people from Grand Rapids, Grandville, Zeeland.

JM: So you have an area-wide reputation.

VK: Right.

JM: As I think back to the times that I've been there, I see a large number of senior citizens. Has that always been the case?

VK: Pretty much, I would say. It's for the people who want to sit down and just enjoy.

JM: I saw some beautiful situations with grandchildren the other night. But otherwise it is an older people's event.

VK: It is. It's always been so. Our band was quite small for some years after the war. We probably only had forty or fifty members and now I think we have about seventy-five or eighty people in the band. There seems to be a renewed interest in music, that type of thing. If we have more leisure time or what...For a while it seemed like young people got out of band in high school and they just didn't go on. Now we have more and more people who are really interested to keep on playing.

JM: Has the instrumental aspect of it changed? In other words, have you brought in new

instruments or is it pretty much the standard?

VK: It's pretty much standard instruments.

JM: In your time here, you also became involved in a number of community activities and you mentioned the Lions Club here. You want to tell us about it?

VK: I was in the Lions Club and am the past president of the Holland Lions Club. I enjoyed the club very much but we went to some Tuesday night meetings. The Lions Club changed to Tuesday night meetings and I had had a perfect record in the American Legion Band, so at that time I quit. Then a few years later I joined the Exchange Club.

JM: Will you tell us something about the Exchange Club? I know what a Lions Club is and I think most people do, but the Exchange Club may be a little different.

VK: Well, we served young peoples' organizations and we met in the Evergreen Commons. We probably had about fifty people in the Exchange Club. I guess I would like to say service clubs today are having a hard time. It seems like people are so busy and just do not have time to take that time off. It's harder for people to get off from a job to go to a service club. I was in the Exchange Club for about ten years, I think. But then it seems that the time for funerals have changed. We have many more funerals at eleven o'clock in the morning. We have more funerals at eleven now that we do in the afternoon, and my funerals run right through the dinner hour. So I'm still an inactive member of the Exchange Club. But I just can't make it to meetings because lots of days I'm busy at that time so that has curtailed my going to that.

JM: Have you been involved in any community activities, that is to say as relates to the government perhaps, or have you been on any special committees for the community?

VK: I've stayed out of politics pretty much.

JM: Probably a wise thing to do. (Laughs).

VK: Yes, I think so. (Laughs)

JM: Any other kind of volunteerism that you're involved in?

VK: Just for the church and so on. My wife is very active and volunteers. She was a volunteer for the Good Samaritan Center. She still volunteers for the church - the new program we have with the schools (Kids USA). She's a teacher there. She worked with Hope Church for a while with the children's school there.

JM: Has she had an education background at all?

VK: Not really, no. She's a cosmetologist. She went to cosmetology school.

JM: That's why she always looks so nice. Getting back to organizational life - have you been active in your profession on regional and state levels?

VK: No, my son has done most of those jobs. He was asked to be president this year of our district and he has served once before.

JM: You're talking about Craig?

VK: Yes. It just seems our funeral home was small enough that we had to be home and be there with the ambulance business, that just took up so much of our time.

JM: Are you suggesting then that your business is more focused now than it was then?

VK: Yes, it is.

JM: It doesn't all depend upon one or two people?

VK: That's true. Right now we have eight licensed funeral directors in our firm.

JM: You have three sites?

VK: Four sites. Three in Holland and one in Saugatuck.

JM: I wasn't aware of that. There is one other thing in regard to the industry that you are in and that is developing. That is the whole situation regarding cremation. That is beginning to take more and more...

VK: Yes, we do. I can see it growing in cremation. We've had that before and then it changed again and now it has come back again. For a while we had a lot of willed people that would will theirs to universities. And that was a big thing for a while but we hardly ever have that anymore. And I don't know why.

JM: There may be a push for that again some day.

VK: That might be.

JM: How about sharing organs? Of course, you don't get to that point. That's all taken care of at the hospital.

VK: That is to a point, but it does make a difference to us too.

JM: I suppose. It has to do with the timing and so forth.

VK: That's right. And we haven't had as much of that just recently either, I don't think, and that is really done by the people before it comes to us. But I think that goes in spells too. Why, I can't tell you.

JM: People are traveling much more than they used to. Are you having more funerals involving people who pass away at a distance?

VK: Yes, that varies all the time.

JM: I'm sure you want to make some reflections on Holland. You've seen a lot of changes in the community. Would you like to make some comments about that?

VK: I think that our community has regenerated in the last years. I look at Eighth Street when I was a young boy. I see the staple companies like A & P's, Kroger Stores, Montgomery Wards, Sears, downtown area. We have none of that. About seven or eight years ago, and I guess I can say with the entrepreneur Mr. Prince's help, he wanted to rebuild our town and we being so close to the town with our funeral home we were worried about our Eighth Street. I think we have just done the greatest job that could be done and I can only thank the men that really were behind this. Our mayor, I think, was a great pusher for these things.

JM: Who was the mayor at that time?

VK: Well, several. Of course, our mayor today has been there how long?

JM: Four years.

VK: Just great.

JM: A very strong promoter.

VK: The town is busy, and as I look back when they put the street heating, snow melt in the street. I look at that and just at that same time I see all our business moving to the mall, and I can remember talking to Mr. Fabiano who was a long time person in the area. I said, "What do you think, Paul?" "Oh," he said, "It doesn't look good, it doesn't look good." And here I can go down and talk to him today and he's on top of the world.

JM: They tell me the apartments that used to be flophouses on Eighth Street are now

desirable.

VK: All very desirable. In fact, people that you wouldn't ever dream that would go up and are renting them. And they're all rented! And people are waiting for those apartments today. And every building I think right now, every business on the original Eighth Street is accounted for and has a business in it. I don't know how long its been that we've had all them rented.

JM: Have you been a member of the merchants association or the Chamber of Commerce or anything of that sort?

VK: Yes, we are members.

JM: Have you been active in that yourself personally?

VK: No, I haven't.

JM: But you pay your dues?

VK: Oh yes. You're invited to all of the meetings if you're a member, but again we ...our business was small at that time. It's grown now. It's five times as large as it was in those days.

JM: Has your chief competitor also grown considerably?

VK: (Pause) I don't think I should comment on that. (Laughs) We've grown more than they have. I can say that.

JM: One more comment that I would like to make is an observation. It appears to me the longer that I'm in Holland, that this is a wealthy community.

VK: It is.

JM: Would you want to expand on that and talk about that in relationship to its early

years?

VK: What other town has two of the ten richest people in the United States coming here?

At least, have summer homes in the town. I look at many - the Prince Corporation, the Smiths were where the Chris Craft Corporation, Roamer, the Padnos' are big, big people.

JM: They've been good citizens, right?

VK: They've been good active citizens in the town.

JM: They've shared their wealth with their employees and so on.

VK: That's right. We just have big companies that have gone. Zeeland, I guess I can count that all in the general area. All of these have just done well and we have a good people...at least when we're asking to find funeral directors we can go here and there. When you say, "To Holland", they like Holland. It's got a good name. It's a good place to live.

JM: As compared to 1950, for example, 1955. How would you compare it?

VK: Well, the city has changed. I can remember in those days the tennis courts were closed on Sunday. The ball fields were closed on Sunday. I'm not saying that's good or bad, but you asked, "what changes." We were a very quiet town on Sundays. I think that's the biggest change. Today, I think it's probably around 40% of the population in Holland is Hispanic now.

JM: Is that reflected in your funeral services as well?

VK: Yes. I think the Catholic denomination in Holland has grown in great lengths. We have two large Catholic parishes and both are expanding even now. Both are

expanding their churches.

JM: Now again, looking at the church scene with which you have been rather close, particularly as an observer. There is much more "grass roots ecumenism," as we say, than there used to be, isn't there? At least the churches are talking to each other.

VK: Oh yes, definitely! And I should point that out because you made one comment about the Christian Reformed and the Reformed. That has changed immensely in the last ten years. We do much more with each other. Our business has changed that way too. We don't feel nearly that distinctiveness that was there. And I think that's very good for all of us.

JM: You're the one who should be making the comments, but I would make this comment. That as the city changes (and we're talking about ethnic change too), unless we have a strong altruistic government, we're not going to make it. In other words, we have to be hard headed but we also have to be planning for this and allowing for this and trying to build a relationship that will survive because that's where communities have really gone astray by not being able to handle that change. You've got the Garys, and the Roseland Chicagos and so forth.

VK: Yes, if you drive down the street now, and when you asked about '55 you would have seen some minorities, but today you see a great number of minorities.

JM: Well, I think we've had a good time together! Is there anything else you'd like to share?

VK: I enjoyed it.



JM: I did too! I appreciate it, Vic.

VK: I hope it will be useful to whoever it goes to.

## Initial Contact Form

Name: Victor Wayne Kleinheksel

Date of birth: [date removed], 1929 Place of birth: Holland, Mi.

Mother's name (include maiden name): Serena Harriet Top Kleinheksel

Father's name: Julius Kleinheksel

Siblings' names (include birthdates if known):

Carrow Lee Kleinheksel [date removed]

Randall Lynn Kleinheksel [date removed]

Spouse's name (include wife's maiden name): Dorothy Evelyn Boss Kleinheksel

Date of marriage: April 21, 1950 Place of marriage: First Reformed Church  
Holland, Mi.

Children's names (include dates and places of birth):

Conrad Wayne [date removed] Holland, MI. Julie Ann Weeldreyer

Craig Alan [date removed] Holland, MI. [date removed] Holland, MI

Date of death: Place of death and burial:

Religion and church membership: First Reformed Church Holland, MI.

Schooling and/or other training: Holland High School Hope College Wayne State  
University Mortuary Science Degree

Residential history (list all residences chronologically, noting the dates lived at each):

35 E. 9th St. birth - 1950 113 E. 29th St. 1978 -  
16 E. 10th St. 1950 - 1953  
107 E. 30th St. 1953 - 1978 All in Holland, MI.

Occupational history (list all occupations chronologically, noting the place of work, the type of work done there, and the approximate salary):

Mills Ice Cream during High School  
Ambulance attendant during college and later  
Private trumpet instructor college and later  
Dykstra Funeral Homes Mortician and funeral director and later owner.

Membership in clubs and organizations (note dates of membership and offices held):

Holland Lions Club president - different committees  
Holland Exchange Club various committees

Other general information:

Life long member of First Reformed Church serving on the consistory  
as a deacon and an elder and various committees.