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Perez, Herminio Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Herminio Perez

(unedited)

Conducted November 22, 1996
by Rachael Wagner

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Herminio Perez
Interviewer: Rachel Wagner
November 21, 1996

RW: What is your name and date of birth?

HJP: Herminio J. Perez, [date removed], 1941.

RW: Were you born in Holland?

HJP: No I wasn't. I was born in Mexico. The city of Santa Monica, Mexico.

RW: When did you come to Holland then?

HJP: 1956 with my parents.

RW: Can you tell me a little bit about your family and where you've lived during your life?

HJP: To start off, we immigrated from Mexico when I was three years old with my parents. We lived in Edinburg, Texas for ten years, 1944-1956. That's more than ten years. My parents decided to come up north after that because living conditions and wages, money-wise, was not what we expected in Texas as they did in Holland. The reason we came to Holland is because my mother remarried after my mom and dad got a divorce. My stepdad used to live here in Holland, and he used to work for Heinz. So, we came up here in 1956. I graduated from Holland High in 1960, married my high school sweetheart, Mary Anne Truost. We had 2 children, a boy and a girl: Alicia Marie, born in 1960, and David John who was born in 1961. They're both married and I have 2 grandchildren with each one, a boy and a girl in each family.

My work experience in Holland since I graduated in 1960 has been working with three different outfits or companies, one in Zeeland and two in Holland. Right after high school I started working for Dewitt's Poultry Processing Plant in Zeeland. I worked for the company for four years. I started working for General Electric in 1964. I worked with them until January 1991, when General Electric closed down the plant in Holland. After that, I went to work for the Holland Public School system, working as a custodian, maintenance/custodian. My work experience with General Electric was doing production control and supervision. That's about what my work experience is.

RW: What about the Arts Council?

HJP: The Arts Council is just a temporary job for right now. It's a part-time job. I do enjoy the work here.

RW: What other organizations are you involved in, in the community?

HJP: The only one that I am involved with is the Elks, the Holland Elks Lodge. I have been a member of the Elks for 14 years.

RW: How did you get involved with that?

HJP: A friend introduced me to, talked me into joining, the Elks. They do a lot of projects for the community.

RW: What are some of the biggest changes you have seen in Holland over the past 50 years?

HJP: The population explosion.

RW: What do you think about that?

HJP: I don't like it.

RW: Why not?

HJP: Too many problems with it.

RW: Such as?

HJP: Gang related problems, traffic problems, and housing problems.

RW: You don't think they have enough room to house everyone?

HJP: No, they don't. Not enough houses that people can afford. That's about it. I don't have any other problems besides those with the population explosion. Also, with the industry, when a lot of industry started coming into town, that's when a lot of changes started to occur.

RW: When was that?

HJP: That was about 15 years ago. Up to that point, Holland was still a small city. It was just a small city, that's all it was. When the industry came in, everything started expanding and we started having people from different ethnic groups. Back in 1960, when I first came in 1956, there were only about 100 Hispanic families in town. Today Holland is probably 28% Hispanic. That is quite a change. At that time, everybody knew everybody then. We didn't experience the problems.

RW: Like gang related?

HJP: Yes, gang related like they do now.

RW: What changes do you think took place after G.E. closed down?

HJP: The community wasn't too hardly hit, they didn't feel it as much if it would have been 15 years ago. In 1990, we had so much industry in town, it absorbed all the

people who were laid off or lost their jobs, so there wasn't that hard of an impact on the city at all. Probably the revenue more than anything else for the city. But, G.E. was the best working place in town back in 1960 through the '70s. It was the place to work at.

RW: Do you think a lot of people moved here to work there?

HJP: Not really. Most of the people who came here were professionals. Plant managers, engineers, those were the people who moved here, other than that, no. It didn't have that much of an impact.

RW: Do you think that you have had to change your lifestyle any to react to these changes?

HJP: Definitely. You have to be more aware of what is going on around you. I don't feel as safe as I used to be. I used to feel more safer. I don't drive down through town like I used to in the early days (in the '60s). But now, you have to watch your step all the time. You have to be more careful.

RW: And in different parts of town more so than others, right?

HJP: Different sections of the city, that's correct.

RW: If you moved to Holland from another area, what were your first impressions of this city?

HJP: Probably the most impressive thing that I noticed was how clean the city was and how people reacted to Hispanic people moving here. We didn't integrate too much then. They acted friendly, but you didn't mix like you do now. Then you stayed with the Hispanic group. You didn't date white girls.

RW: What other areas were segregated like that? Did you go to a church?

HJP: I went to St. Francis which is a Catholic church. Most of the Hispanics were Catholic then, but as the years went by, when I married Mary Anne Truost, I changed denominations. I went from Catholic to First Reformed. When we had our first child, my kids are blonde hair, blue eyed, walking with me, everyone would look at us and say, "What is he doing with them?" But I never thought of that because it was just me.

RW: You said it was cleaner?

HJP: Much cleaner, yes.

RW: Is it still probably as clean as it was when you first moved here?

HJP: The city? Not really. The more people that are here in town, it is not kept as clean as it used to and the moving of all the stores from downtown to the malls, or moving out of town, it has left a different impact on all the old residents because they used to all come downtown to do their shopping. Now they all have to go down to the mall or out of town. But it was fun coming to town to do your shopping. You could cruise down 8th Street back and forth.

RW: Are there things that concern you now about Holland, like outstanding qualities?

HJP: My concern is that Holland is growing too fast. With growing too fast you have a lot of changes, a lot of problems with different cultures, with different ethnic groups. I don't know if Holland can handle that or not.

RW: Do you think that there are drawbacks to living here?

HJP: Not really. I don't think there are any drawbacks. You have to get used to the idea of having all these people around here, the big population that we have now.

RW: Are you involved in a church?

HJP: I go to church, yes, but I'm not involved as an elder or deacon, no. I'm still Reformed.

RW: Has it changed since when you first converted?

HJP: No. Not really. They're the same, but the church that I went to is not.

RW: Do you think that there are any controversies in Holland?

HJP: No. (laughter)

RW: How has Hope College changed?

HJP: Hope College has changed from a small private college to a college that is well-recognized nationwide and it has a good educational system.

RW: What was the size when you first got here?

HJP: Probably around 1,200 then. But they have built quite a few buildings since that time. So it has come a long way.

RW: Do you think that the community has reacted to that?

HJP: Not really. I think they like that.

RW: Do you think it draws people in because the college is here?

HJP: Not really. It has nothing to do with that. I think that the draw here is probably the industry more than anything else.

RW: How did the public react to the changing of Holland to becoming more of an industrial city that occurred during the mid fifties and late sixties?

HJP: The mid '50s and '60s didn't have any effect at all, hardly any drawbacks at all. There wasn't that much reaction, but I would say that the industry explosion of the

'80s and '90s was the biggest concern for everybody.

RW: What happened then?

HJP: Haworth and Donnelly, that's when they all exploded. They were just small companies then and they just tripled in size and so people didn't like to see all that industry in here because it was drawing too many people in to town. That was the biggest drawback. And, traffic congestion. Back in the '60s I could drive from Quincy on the highway from 31, I could drive to work in 15 minutes. You could drive from Quincy on 31 all the way down to 16th Street with hardly any traffic on the road. Now it is bumper to bumper now. And it just throws you for a loop. It's awful. I don't like it.

RW: How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays in the community today?

HJP: Everybody knows that this is a Dutch community to begin with and they will be here forever and it plays a big, big important role. They want to keep their heritage like Hispanics want to keep their heritage.

RW: Do you think they conflict, because of the different ethnicities moving in?

HJP: Do you think there can be conflicting interests in that? There probably will be. Well, not with the newer generation of Dutch. The older generation was very concerned about it and they didn't like that.

RW: Do you think that was just with any different ethnicity group or do you think that was because of lower class?

HJP: Class doesn't have anything to do with it. I think that it has to do with what kind of race they are. You see that a lot. Hispanics can't stand Asians, Asians can't stand

Hispanics, and blacks can't stand Asians, and some Hispanics can't stand white people either. And you hear that a lot. I hear that a lot from Spanish speaking people. I do hear it a lot.

RW: Do you think that they feel like they are treated differently, for example, if they shop on Eighth Street? I know that one thing we did in my class was to come down and check stores, to see if they had different products for different races, and a lot of them don't carry things other than for the white population. What do you think about that?

HJP: That doesn't have anything to do with that, I don't think.

RW: Do you think that they are treated equally?

HJP: I think that as long as they are spending their money, I don't see why not? I think they are (treated equally). That is my feeling.

RW: You have never felt...

HJP: I have never felt, no. As long as I have had money in my pocket to buy for what I had. But I have never looked for any Hispanic products. There are no Hispanic stores in town.

RW: I mean, like, even a toy store, if you were going to buy a doll that was Mexican something or other.

HJP: So? No, as long as you have money I don't think that has anything to do about it.

RW: You've never tried to buy one of those?

HJP: No.

RW: Do you think that the problems facing the general citizen of Holland changed in the

past 50 years? For example, just the traffic congestion and the industrial explosion.

HJP: The housing problem in town... Holland used to have beautiful homes down 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th.

RW: They still do.

HJP: But, in the last 20 years, they have been going, the shape of the houses were kept up and the reason was them (Dutch), I hate to say it, but Hispanics or blacks or Asians bought houses, and they don't take care of them. The Dutch people are conscious of how their homes look. They always kept them real nice: lawns mowed, and the other different ethnic groups don't care what their houses look like. They let the house go down hill and you can see it. You can see it from one street to another, from 19th to 20th Street.

RW: Do you think that crime is different?

HJP: Oh yeah, crime is a lot different now. Back in the old days, old days (laughs). Back in the '50s, '60s and '70s, we didn't have the crime that is happening in Holland now. You didn't hear about gangs fighting, shooting each other, knifing each other, robberies, holdups, assaults, rape. Nowadays, you never heard the sirens going every 15 to 20 minutes like they do now. If you heard them once a day it was a lot. It worries me.

RW: What have you seen differently in the schools since you have been there?

HJP: Back in the '60s when I went to school there were probably maybe about 5 hispanic people in the high school and one black person. We weren't treated any different. We integrated well with the students. We didn't have any problem at all and we

didn't have the problems schools have now. We respected teachers, respected adults. If we did something wrong, we admitted it and we had to work on Saturday. Now kids swear at the teachers and they know they can get away with that because the law is protecting them and the teacher can't touch them at all. Back then, we used to be slapped on the hand. We deserved it. Nowadays, you can't touch them. You can't talk to me that way. I think the law is going too far, to extremes. There should be guidelines.

RW: Describe a typical day for you in 1960 and in 1980.

HJP: In 1960, my typical day--If I was in school, I would get up in the morning and shower, get ready for school, walk all the way from. . .

RW: Where did you live?

HJP: I lived on 18th street and Columbia. I would walk all the way from 18th Street to where the Community Ed building is now, which was the high school. We would do that every day: walk to school and not ride the bus. I would walk through the snow.

RW: What was wrong with the bus? You didn't have it?

HJP: No, at that time we didn't have to ride the bus. We were too close. Only the students from outside the city rode the bus. So we would walk to school.

RW: How old were you in 1960?

HJP: In 1960, I was 19. After school, we would have football practice or go back home and just relax.

RW: Did you work then?

HJP: No, I didn't work then. We would just enjoy and talk to friends and go to bed and

that was it. Then in 1980, I was working, married, had two children. I would get up and go to work, eight hours of work, come back home, have a good meal with my wife and kids. Just relax. If there was something else going, I was involved in softball quite a bit during those years, and I watched my kids grow up. They turned out to be good citizens, no problems.

RW: How do you think that Holland would be without industry?

HJP: Holland wouldn't have the problems that it has now, and it wouldn't be a big city with the population explosion that it has now. It would be a resort town more than anything else.

RW: What about in the winter?

HJP: It would be a resort town. It would probably have the same industry if it stayed the same as it did back in 1960s. You would probably just have Donnelly, Prince, and the small outfits and not grown as much as they did. It would be okay.

RW: The city wouldn't have made as much money though...

HJP: That's true, but they were surviving.

RW: How do you think that it should have been? No huge explosion?

HJP: No. I wished it would have stayed the same as it was.

RW: Have you noticed a generation gap between ages in Holland?

HJP: Not really. I haven't anyway. Why would I notice that? What would that have to do with... Generation gap? No, I haven't noticed any at all.

RW: How about with the older Dutch people probably not accepting the different races into Holland as much as probably like the younger or the more middle-aged?

HJP: Well, that's probably interesting to the other one, then. It's exactly the same to the other one. That's about the generation gap right there.

RW: Can you tell me about a job that you have had in the past 50 years that you really enjoyed?

HJP: Why yes, working at General Electric. The way I got into working at General Electric was through my first wife, Mary Anne. She worked there. We were both working and she told me that there were openings at General Electric and that if I wanted to apply for it. So I did. Being her working there, she talked to the personnel manager and they called me for an interview. So, I went to the interview and I had a second interview and they said you can come work for us. I started work at I think \$2.30 some cents an hour which was good money back then, back in 1964. Minimum wage was \$1.25. I was working at Zeeland Poultry Processing Plant working for \$1.85 an hour. I told my boss that I was going to give him two weeks notice, that I was going to work at General Electric and he said don't leave, they will lay you off every six months. They had a habit of doing that at General Electric. I said, oh well. I told him, if you match what General Electric's paying me, I'll stay. My supervisor said, no I can't do that. He said, I'll give you another dime and that's all. So I said no. I will just leave when my two weeks are up. I started working for General Electric on October 10, 1964. That was in production, brushing rotors. Rotors go into a hermetically sealed motor. That's what they made for General Electric. Hermetically sealed motors. You have no idea what that is, do you? I know, I saw that look on your face. (laughs) Anyway, I worked in production for

three years, and I decided I wasn't going to do that all of my life and I was going to go for something better at General Electric, so I put in for supervision and I got the job. Well, I didn't really get the supervision job there. We took tests, a bunch of people, to see what qualifications we had for what jobs. So, they put me in quality control first for 6 months and then a supervision job opened up and I went to supervision and worked for them for three years and got sick of it. I didn't like it. Too many headaches. You were in the middle of keeping everyone happy, keeping the production people happy and the management happy. It wasn't worth it. Not for the money they were paying for supervision. So I went back to quality control after 3 years of supervision. I worked in quality control again in 1973, and then after that, a job opened up in the office for production control specialist. I applied for that and I loved that job because it was such a challenging job. That position was ordering all the raw material for the plant for the whole product that we made. Everything from cables to terminals. I was in production control until General Electric closed which was a long time. And I loved that job. It was my favorite job.

RW: How many people worked there when you first started until the time you closed?

HJP: When I first started, there were around 400-500 people. At the peak, the biggest or the highest employment rate was the time that they had 1,200-1,300. Then it started slowing down. By the time they closed down, they had about 300. During that time, I never got laid off. Not once did I get laid off. The only time that I didn't work was the time our customer went on strike. The customer that we had was Tecumseh Products out of Tecumseh, Michigan. They were a main customer. We supplied

about 95% of our product to them. They closed down so we closed down too. We were out for 13 weeks and that was the only time. But I drew unemployment during that time. Then I started getting sick of drawing unemployment so I worked for a roofing company for awhile and laid gas-lined pipe for awhile.

RW: Was there a job that you didn't like at all?

HJP: Working in Zeeland Processing Plant was a dirty job.

RW: Do you like chicken?

HP: Oh yeah, I like chicken. Have you ever worked in a processing line? (laughs)

RW: No, tell me about it.

HP: What? The hermetically sealed motor or the processing plant? (laughs) They unload the chickens and turkeys out of the crates in the truck. Either one or two guys take them out of the trucks, put them up on hooks and hang them upside down by their feet. They go down the conveyer and there's a person just as its going to the building with a knife, electric knife, cuts their throat and then they bleed on the floor. They go through a de-feathering machine. No, I didn't like it. I didn't like any part of that job. I did that for a while, loading the chickens and turkeys on the hooks, and the other was taking the crop out of the chicken or turkey.

RW: How do you think the role of women has changed in the past 50 years?

HJP: It has changed drastically from just being a domestic mother or a housewife to being a bread winner along with the husband. And they have to nowadays. Women are more aggressive and very open and more up front, not laid back at all. Which I like in a women, and I admire them for what they are doing.

RW: Did your wife work while you worked?

HJP: Yes. The only time I just worked was when we she was pregnant.

RW: Did you want her to work?

HJP: It didn't bother me either way. To get what we wanted, we both had to work. We built our house in 1964 by ourselves, with the help of my father-in-law, for \$14,000 and this was a 3-bedroom house. So figure that from now until then, building a house nowadays to what it cost then.

RW: Can you tell me about a major turning point you had in your life?

HJP: That would be when I started working for General Electric. It changed my life. I didn't care. I had no ambition at all. I didn't have any ambitions of what I wanted to do. I just wanted to work and do production. That's all. So, that was a turning point. I wanted to advance myself and be more assertive.

RW: Did that happen?

HJP: Yes, yes it did. I was too laid back.

RW: What do you think other people say about Holland?

HJP: I think other people like Holland because it's a thriving community and the different diversity of groups in here...

RW: Do you think that is a good thing?

HJP: Yes and no.

RW: You think people say good things about Holland?

HJP: Oh yes, you hear that a lot from professionals. That's all I'm going to say.