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Postma, Jean Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Jean Postma

Conducted October 28, 1997
by Ena Brooks

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
EB: We’ll go through this again. I’ll ask you your full name.

JP: Jean Evelyn Smail Postma.

EB: And your date of birth and place of birth?

JP: [date removed], 1931, and I was born in Cleveland, Ohio.

EB: Your mother’s name?

JP: Frances Glenn.

EB: And your father’s name?

JP: Thomas Mellon Smail.

EB: And your brother’s name and date of birth.

JP: He is Glenn Wayne Smail, and he was born on [date removed], 1934.

EB: Your spouse’s name, and the date and place you were married?

JP: My husband’s name is Andrew Donald Postma. He’s ordinarily called Don. We were married in my home church in Lakewood, Ohio, a Presbyterian Church, and we were married on September 4, 1954.

EB: Your childrens’ names?

JP: We have two children. The oldest one is a boy. His name is David Andrew Postma. He was born on [date removed], 1964. Both he and his sister are adopted. His sister is younger than he is. Her name is Susanna Ellen Postma and she was born on [date removed], 1967.
EB: What church are you associated with here in Holland?

JP: (Laughs) Oh, dear! We are not. I'm Presbyterian by background. In fact, I have been very interested in doing a little research for my own genealogy to see what a part the Scotch Presbyterians played in the settlement of Pennsylvania. My mother was a devout Presbyterian and very active in her church and taught Sunday School and adult Sunday School class for nineteen years. She really was a biblical scholar. So that was the way I was brought up. But thanks to the leavening influence of the University of Michigan and the various cultures and religions in the people that I met there, I think that I can't be said to be religious at this point. I think that all religions have their values and their points and their strengths in common, and so I'm not a particular devotee of any religion. Nor is my husband, I must say. His background was Reformed Church in America. He belonged to the Hope Church here as did his parents. But his father was from a very strict Christian Reformed background. He, like my father, had very little use for the strictures of the church, shall I say. I remember my father did not believe in wearing one's religion on one's sleeve, and yet he did more kind things for people totally unknown to the general population than many other people I have known. So that's the kind of religion, if you will, that I try to practice.

EB: When did you first come to Holland?

JP: The first time I ever saw Holland must have been in the fall of 1951. Don and I had met at the University of Michigan when he transferred there in 1949, and I was a freshman student. I had dated members of his fraternity, and finally he and I met
through a speech class that he was substituting as the instructor for in the spring of my sophomore year. We began to date and the following fall of 1951, we were "pinned," that is, we were "engaged to be engaged" and I came with him to Holland to meet his parents in September before school started. At that time, if I remember correctly, Holland only had about 35,000 in population. However, the college was booming thanks to the post-World War II boom given by the GI Bill. So it was a very lively town at that point and I enjoyed coming here to visit. The community that I grew up in, which was a suburb of Cleveland, was about twice as large. Yet even in a town of 70,000, if you had lived there all of your life, you knew a lot of the people involved. So I could relate well to this town and my in-laws' part in it.

EB: Where else have you lived besides Holland and that suburb outside of Cleveland?

JP: When we were first married, my husband was still in the Army because the Korean War was on and he had enlisted. At that time he was afraid that he was not eligible for Officers Candidate School because although he had a masters degree from the University of Michigan, his eyesight was so poor that he was actually legally blind in one eye. So when he knew he was going to be drafted by the local draft board, he enlisted instead. It worked out fine because he got to choose an option which kept him in this country for the three years he was in service. He was a member of what was then called the Counter-intelligence Corps based at that time in Baltimore, Maryland. So we lived the first year we were married in Aberdeen, Maryland, where the heavy weapons, or large armored proving ground is. We didn’t live actually on the army post. We had a small house in the little town of Aberdeen outside. I went
to work for a VA hospital about ten miles away which cared for psychiatric patients whose psychoses were apparently service related. And so I worked there and my husband was on detached duty from Camp Holobird, Maryland, which was the CIC headquarters at that time in Baltimore. So we had an eastern shore experience the first year we were married. However, I think by the end of that year we had agreed that we wanted to try to come back to live in the middle west. I can remember how hot it was by the first of July in Maryland and how I longed to get back here to where it was cooler. So he was due to be discharged the end of July in 1955, and he had a terminal leave of about a week so he spent time interviewing for jobs both in the Baltimore-Washington area and in Cleveland. And got a job with a Cleveland firm called the Penton Publishing Company as a writer for the old Steel Magazine which is now defunct. At that point we knew we would be coming back to the midwest to live, and I came back here with him on terminal leave. On July 10 we stayed with my parents in Cleveland and I let him go back to Maryland to oversee the packing and moving of our things to Rocky River, Ohio, where we had rented an apartment. I didn’t care if I didn’t see Maryland again at that time.

EB: And from Rocky River?

JP: We lived in the Cleveland area only a short time. They needed a man to replace the writer who had been assigned to Detroit, and because Don had graduated - in fact, had gotten three degrees at the University of Michigan - they felt that he might be a logical candidate. He remembers talking to the president of the company at that time about it who assured him that they would give him six months to find another job if
the job as the resident editor in Detroit didn’t work out. (Laughs) But it did. He had a big challenge in terms of filling the job. He had to write a weekly column called "Mirrors of Motordom," and he didn’t know very much about the auto industry when he began that first year but by the end of it he certainly did. So he survived the first year and actually made a very good career out of writing, and at his job at Steel he was promoted. Finally, we returned to Cleveland for three years. He had tried to work continuing out of Detroit as the roving editor, but after doing that for two years it was obvious to the "powers" that were in Cleveland that he needed to be stationed in Cleveland. So we went back to Cleveland for three years. But at that time, the steel industry was rapidly leaving this country and Japan was taking over the manufacturing of steel worldwide and the magazine was dying by inches because its revenue basically came from advertising. So Don thought maybe he ought to look around for a new job, and at age forty he took a sudden career move and jumped to working for General Motors in public relations news writing. So we came back to Detroit because he was assigned to the central office of GM. He worked out of the big building on West Grand Boulevard in Detroit then for another eighteen years. The last five years he spent with General Motors as the director for public relations out at the Technical Center in Warren, Michigan, and retired from that job when he was sixty-three.

EB: And then from Detroit you moved to Holland?

JP: Yes, by that time (having looked all around the country for a place that we could both enjoy retiring), we decided to come back to Holland, probably number one because
although his father had died in 1969, his mother was still alive and living here in a nursing home. And because of her precarious health, we just felt that we shouldn't be too far away from her. We very nearly went to South Carolina. We had friends who had retired in a golf retirement community there which we liked very much and the weather was certainly more temperate. But I wanted a town which had a college because I thought many of the kinds of activities I was accustomed to in Cleveland and in Detroit would be found in a college community - that is, concerts and plays and lectures and other stimulating kinds of events which I was afraid I would miss too much if we were in a retirement community which strictly had golf as its focus. So we decided to come here and I am very happy that we did. It's worked out really well.

EB: That's great! Tell me about your schooling.

JP: I'm a nurse by background. My father was a dentist and I think I got my interest in preventive medicine from him because as you may know dentists are very interested in the prevention of problems. He always used to say to my brother and me (and this was before fluoride was generally accepted as a remedy for tooth decay), "I cannot make any money working on you kids!" In other words, we would not be paying patients and so he absolutely nixed the idea of candy or Coca Cola, which was then of course sweetened with sugar, in our house because of the damage it would do to our teeth. So I grew up with the idea that problems could be prevented. I didn't have any cavities until I went away to school at the University of Michigan and substituted a candy bar for my usual nourishing lunch and developed about seven cavities in one
year. That taught me something anyhow. I went to the nursing school at the
University of Michigan when they still had a five-year program. You started with
two years of Literature, Science & Arts school first and then transferred into the
school of nursing. The other half of my class besides five-year students, we also had
girls who came directly from graduating from high school. And our courses were not
very much different. We weren't separated except in our senior when the five-year
students took more courses having to do with administration and supervision and that
kind of thing. I've always been very glad that I went to the University of Michigan.
I rather deliberately picked it because it was a well known, well respected school at
that time. My mother had gone to school at Michigan and was very interested in
seeing me come here. I never had any difficulty getting a job because of my training
at Michigan. It was very thorough and very practical, and I never felt out of my
depth or that I lacked the skills to perform any job that I took.

EB: How long did you work as a nurse?

JP: Probably off and on about twenty-five years. When we were married in 1954, it was
not common for women to work all of their married lives. Although my family had
always said that I ought to be prepared to earn my own living if I didn't marry, or if
I married and something happened to my husband, then I would have a skill that
would be marketable. But I really hadn't planned to work. I really thought I would
stay home and have a family, and so I tried. I had a couple of miscarriages and after
I would recover mentally and physically from the miscarriages, I would feel at loose
ends. So I would take another nursing job and I would work and begin to feel
happier and better physically and mentally and get pregnant again and lose the baby again. That cycle repeated itself three or four times as I went in and out of jobs. But I finally discovered that the kind of work I liked the best was public health nursing. When I finally got to such a job, first working in Detroit for the Detroit Department of Health, I really decided that I really liked public health nursing far better than hospital nursing. However, I could not have been promoted to a supervisory position in Detroit unless I lived in Detroit. That was a residency rule that held true for all of the city's employees at that time. And yet I wasn't qualified to be a public health nurse in Oakland County where we lived because I had not had any public health training in my nursing program. That was an option which I did not elect. So I went back to the University of Michigan. We lived in the Birmingham area in Detroit and I commuted back and forth to school for a year to pick up the public health requirements that I lacked - what would have been the old bachelors degree in public health nursing, except that it was phased out that year of 1962 just after I finished. About that time we decided that we would try to adopt children. So I went to work for Oakland County for a year. But before the year was up we were notified by the adoption agency that they had a baby that they would place with us. And as I say at that time, it was not the thing to do to have children and work. I can remember my boss at the Oakland County Health Department calling me into her office and asking me if it was true I was going to adopt a baby. I said I was and she said, "Well, how will you manage a baby and manage to work full time?" And I said, well, I really didn't think that was any concern of hers. And she said, "Well, I am concerned. If
you are going to adopt this baby, then you will no longer work for this agency." So I felt like I was fired on the spot. It was not a happy experience. But at that time we were so anxious to have a family, I decided that was the most important thing. So I gave notice and left my job two weeks after that. The baby, a little boy, was born in December of 1964, and we adopted him on Valentine’s Day of 1965, the best Valentine’s Day present either of us had ever had. Then my husband’s career, which had reached the point where he was being asked to return to Cleveland to live, then delayed the adoption of the second child because the agency through which we went, which was The Cradle in Evanston, Illinois, decided that they would prefer to do the second home study after we got settled again in Cleveland. So the second child, instead of being nearer two years or eighteen months age difference from the first, was two and a half years younger than the first. But as I remember, the home study did not take nearly so long the second time and within about a month from the time we had formally applied to adopt the second child and had the home study, we were notified that there was a little girl waiting for us in Evanston. So at about the same time my brother got married finally in New York City, we adopted a second child and had kind of a wild weekend where we brought the baby home from Evanston. Don’s parents came from Holland to pick up David to take back to Holland to stay with them for a week, and we turned the baby over to a friend of my mother’s who was a practical nurse and her husband came to babysit in our home for a week while we flew to New York to participate in my brother’s wedding. But it all worked out and everybody’s lived happily ever after!
EB: Now I understand that you volunteer here in Holland?

JP: Yes.

EB: Would you like to talk about that? Where you volunteer?

JP: When we retired and came to Holland both my husband and I were pretty tired of working. After my children got to be in junior high, I had gone back to work full-time. Previously I had gone back to school part-time to get my masters degree in public health and along the way got an award for being the longest part-time student in my class. Anyhow, I finally got my masters degree in 1974 and went back to work - first as the director of a home health agency, and then for a year as a Blue Cross home care consultant, and finally back to the Oakland County Health Department to work as a public health nurse. And so I had worked while my children completed high school and went on to college. Just at the time I was thinking I could cut back to part-time work, I was offered a job at Oakland University teaching in their nursing school program in the senior year in community health. So I thought that sounded pretty good and it was a part-time position. So I took that and enjoyed it very much. I did that for three years just before my husband retired. When we came here, I kept my nursing license active just in case I should run into such a job here at the nursing program through Hope and Calvin or doing something else in public health. But both my husband and I decided we were kind of tired of doing what we had done for so long for a living. And yet we weren’t quite ready to stay home and watch television all day. So he took a job teaching part-time at Grand Valley State University, which he still does, and that left me with extra time on my
hands and I decided...I saw an ad in the paper asking for people to assist at the Netherlands Museum moving to their new location. This was in the fall of 1992; we came here July 1, 1992. So I went down to the museum to volunteer and I’ve been volunteering there ever since in one capacity or another. The reason I went down there in the first place was because having just moved a whole household of goods I thought I could certainly be of some use to them in moving from one building to another. I got involved in the museum’s programs and volunteered as a docent and did that for several years. I still do tours once in a while when they need people. But over the years I’ve evolved from volunteering in that area to spending more of my time with the curator helping catalog items which the museum has accepted for safekeeping and/or doing research about those items, either for labels for display in the museum or for background for one purpose or another. So I still volunteer at the museum a day every week. Through that job and through the assignments to do research in the museum, I became acquainted with the staff at the Archives who were very helpful to me and very friendly, and I was asked by Larry Wagenaar to become a volunteer. I guess I was so flattered by his asking me that I decided that that would be a nice second kind of volunteer service. So I volunteer there usually two afternoons a week. My project there has been to put onto the computer an index of all the articles in the Anchor, the student newspaper publication, since its origin, I think back in 1870 something or 1880 up to the present. Most of it is now on the computer which means on the World Wide Web. We are still refining the index and bringing it up-to-date, but that’s what I do there.
EB: Would you like to mention anything about the change from the old museum to the new museum?

JP: I’m ashamed to say I was only in the old museum a couple of times. I took my children through it. I don’t remember that I was ever in it before that. But I took my children through it when we were visiting here in the summer. We have had a cottage out at Port Sheldon for about thirty years, and so in the summers we would come here so my kids could get to know their grandparents. Even when we lived in Cleveland we had at least two weeks here as a summer vacation. When we lived in Detroit we would come over on weekends and so they were more familiar with the town, and that indeed is what kept us in touch with the town and made me think about Holland as a possible place to retire. Anyway, I remember the old museum as being quite small. Interesting, but not of particular interest to anybody who wasn’t Dutch. My remembrance of it was that the exhibits were not particularly well interpreted, and so I really had not much idea of what I was looking at. So I was very interested in the plans for the new museum with a professional staff, professional design of the exhibits, and the kind of research that would go into displaying and labeling the various artifacts. Actually, it was a very interesting experience for me to learn what goes on behind the scenes of a museum, which I really had not thought about before. And since I always have regarded myself as a frustrated liberal arts major, it just seemed like a perfectly wonderful way to learn about a field that I really knew nothing about. And so it has proved. It’s just been a really interesting "second career," so to say, to learn about a museum and how it works and what goes on
there. I've become much more interested in history, both in general terms and in the specific terms of my own family's genealogy then I would have ever thought possible. And have learned a great deal both about Holland and it's settlement and development and about my own background. My mother's family in particular came from Pennsylvania, lived on the same farm for about a hundred and twenty-five years as far as I can tell, and there are indications that the family was in the country from at least 1730 on. So it's just opened up a lot of very interesting new mental challenges for me.

EB: Since you've come to Holland from your first visit to now, your living here, what has been the most significant changes you've noticed?

JP: Well, I am sorry to say it, but I think it comes from growth. Holland's growth has been tremendous in the time that I have been acquainted with the town, and with that growth I think have come some problems which Holland is still trying to deal with. I think as far as city administration is concerned they have done very well. Their zoning laws have been good. The people who have overseen the schools have done a good job of keeping them contemporary and growing with the size of the school population. The biggest problem that I think Holland faces in concert with every other town in the nation is the problem of crime. I do believe that they've made some very intelligent decisions about how to deal with crime. And I do think they have been very wise to get some help from the federal government with specific projects and problems. I've seen a tremendous change in the population make up of Holland. When I first began to be acquainted with the town, people spoke Dutch in
the street. I don’t hear that anymore. On the other hand, I never saw any but Dutch faces. Now, especially in the Tulip Time parade, you see a lot of different nationalities reflected. One of my most interesting experiences came in a Tulip Time parade, some years ago now, when we were entertaining friends from Kalamazoo who enjoy coming up for Tulip Time. As we were watching the school children parade past, the woman ahead of me, part of a bus tour from out of state somewhere, said, "Isn’t that awful to see all those Asian faces when there should be only Dutch ones in the Tulip Time parade." And I said to the woman, it popped out without my thinking, "Have you ever heard of the Dutch East Indies?" I said, "A good friend whose mother was born on the Island of Bali and whose father was a Dutch importer (he was actually a resident of the Netherlands before World War II) and they lived in New York City and she was among the most sophisticated people I knew and definitely Balinese in appearance and strikingly beautiful!" I could not believe that anybody could be so ignorant of the Netherlands past as to think they were all blonde haired and blue-eyed! (laughs). Just an interesting little sidelight...

EB: Holland has been recognized as one of the ten All-America cities. Why do you think Holland has been given this honor?

JP: One of my favorite people, though I don’t know her at all, but I know what she does, is the principal at the school - and I can’t even tell you her name at the moment - in the area just west of the historic district where she has instituted wonderful mechanisms for making the school a central community gathering place, where parents feel comfortable as well as their children in coming to the school for
programs, for community service, for outreach programs of all kinds. And I really think that’s what it takes. The principal of the school can have a great influence on the community that that school serves. And I think she is a perfect example of that. I saw this in another community where I was working as a public health nurse, and it can really strengthen a community beyond just the resources of the city. When you get the city hall working with the educational community, working with the police department, you get a wonderful combination of talents that can attract volunteers who will see that your community stands head and shoulders above the rest. One of the things about the tape that I saw about winning the award in our city was the outstanding job done by a youngster at that school in talking about his school program and the fine example of what a good educational system could do for a child whose background is probably less than one would wish. I hope he becomes a lawyer some day. They could use him in Washington.

EB: On the education note, what role does Hope College play in the community and what role does the community play at Hope College?

JP: Though I never attended Hope College, it’s just one of my very favorite institutions, not the least reason of which is because they had the foresight to sponsor the HASP organization of which my husband and I are both members. And we thank John Hollenbach every time we see him for having the creativity to think of the organization and then the courage and spirit to see the thing through so that it’s the thriving organization of over three hundred people that it is today. It’s probably my favorite form of recreation to attend classes and meetings in that organization. And
with my volunteer activities which bring me into the Van Wylen Library, I think I at least have a little notion of what Hope College is all about. And to my mind, it’s an excellent example of a traditional liberal arts college. That’s the kind of education that I think we really need for the future. I don’t think we can all afford to be specialists. I don’t think we know what the next fifty years is going to bring. I think people who are too narrowly educated or who have a technical education only have missed out on a lot of the challenges that have come our way in the last fifty years, because if you aren’t exposed to things in your youth, you just cannot adjust quickly enough when you get to be my age to take advantage of the opportunities that may be presented. So I really am strongly in favor of a liberal arts education, and I have said many times that I am rectifying my own lack of knowledge in the arts by belonging to HASP and by enjoying their classes and rubbing elbows with both current staff of Hope College and retired staff and gaining insight from their wisdom and their erudition. It’s just one of my favorite things here. I’ve even persuaded my husband to contribute a little money from time to time.

EB: I’m sure that helps the College too! Why don’t you tell me a little bit about your heritage.

JP: (Laughs). Do we have another hour?

EB: We’ve got all the time you need!

JP: Another one of my favorite subjects. Marie Zingle is a well-know genealogist here. She was a member of the DAR Chapter of which I am currently regent. And Marie has gotten me really hooked on genealogy. She’s a fine genealogist herself, and she
was very helpful to me in first getting acquainted with the process of research for a background in genealogy and very helpful personally in looking up sources so that I've completed my own genealogy, as I said, back to 1730. I am currently in the process of applying for what is called in the DAR a "supplemental." I already know that I have one Revolutionary War ancestor on my mother's side of the family. But she always said that this was on her mother's side of the family. In other words, my grandmother's. But my mother also said there was at least one if not more Revolutionary War patriots on her father's side of the family - that is the Glenn side. So that's currently what I have gotten into. I not only find that indeed there was a James Glenn, my great-great-great-grandfather, who fought in the Revolution, but there were two other men whose last name was Allen who were relatives, predecessor of my great-great grandmother, Mary Ann Allen, who also were Revolutionary War patriots. One, the captain of his company on the Pennsylvania line. The other, his son, fought in the militia on the western frontier during the Revolution. So that's been another very interesting little sideline. Marie and I regularly, about once a month, drive to Lansing because it's (Side A ends)...

EB: We were talking about...

JP: Yes. I was talking about going to Lansing to the Michigan State Library to do genealogical research because they have a very fine library there, and they have a lot of Pennsylvania records including what's called the "Pennsylvania Archives" where Revolutionary War soldiers are listed, their applications for pensions are listed, the tax records are listed since early in the development of this country. One of the side
benefits of doing this genealogy is I have learned so much more colonial history than I ever learned when I was in school - mainly because now I am interested in it. (Laughs) It has direct application to my own family's decision both to come to this country, which I am sure was the result of the fact that they were Scotch-Irish and had not been able to make a go of farming either in Scotland or in Ireland and saw this country as a chance for a new start, and also because of the sort of background they came from they weren't afraid to fight for the right to be in this country and to hold their own land and to refuse to pay taxes to a king who wasn't, they felt, their king. So that's also been an interesting sidelight, and as I say, I learned a lot of colonial history, particularly the history of Pennsylvania.

EB: Now, when you say "DAR" do you mean "Daughters of the American Revolution?"

JP: Yes, I do.

EB: Okay. I just wanted to clarify that.

JP: The national society and I am the local chapter president, only they don't call it a president in the Society. They call it regent because we are acting for the president. The president of our Society is the woman who is the head of the National Society and who has an office in Washington. Currently she is a Californian, a very interesting and energetic woman who had managed to stir up a small hornet's nest by insisting on a new legal contract with the Children of the American Revolution, a separate society, who for many years have been occupying offices in the headquarters building of the National Daughters of American Revolution building in Washington and paying something like two hundred dollars a year rent for Washington office
space. It's an interesting controversy.

EB: Now, you said you were Scottish and Irish. Is that the extent of your...?

JP: That's my mother's background. I have not gotten into my father's family background yet. But I have no doubt that is going to prove interesting too. He was named after a local judge in Pennsylvania, Thomas Mellon, who was the father of Andrew Mellon who was a wonderful money-maker, banker. But Thomas Mellon was a very straitlaced and upright judge of local reputation in Western Pennsylvania. So it will be interesting to find out why my father was named after him. My father's family came, I understand, from Alsace-Lorraine originally. During the war of Germany with France, Napoleon the Third in 1870, the Smails who considered themselves German if anything, decided to leave when France conquered Alsace. It looked like it was going to be permanently a French province because they were not French. They regarded themselves as German. So they came to this country. My grandmother on that side of the family's last name was Fisher and apparently her family had been here longer. But I really don't know much about them. That will be interesting. That's my next project when I get finished with the Glens. Also, I'm at the point with the Glens where a trip last summer to Scotland just made me even more anxious to find out more about the family because seeing the land that they came from made it very clear why Pennsylvania looked like heaven to them. Pennsylvania is a very fertile farming state. Lots of beautiful trees left. Rolling hills. Plenty of water. Scotland by contrast has very poor, rocky soil. The climate is much colder. The growing season is therefore much shorter. Farmers really had
to struggle to even raise subsistence crops in Scotland and they probably still would if that was their main source of income. Of course, it no longer is. Scotland is widely industrialized. But again, it's an interesting way to learn history by learning the specifics and then generalizing to the larger picture.

EB: I'm sure you've noticed, Holland in the past few years has become very diverse in its ethnicity. How do you think that has affected Holland?

JP: I hear from a lot of people about how the crime rate has risen here, and I think that's probably true as it's true all over. We had one workman tell my husband and me one day that they were leaving Holland to move up north to get away from all the crime here. In a way, we didn't feel like we wanted to stay in Detroit because we had seen the city deteriorate so because of the crime that the drug industry brought to that city. I think it's true. You can't necessarily escape that wherever you go perhaps. But this community, where still the larger part of the population has the same background, values and standards, and is oriented toward Christianity and a Christian code of ethics, appeals to us more than living in isolation, say in Montana. We both appreciate a need to live with people. I guess we feel that we have a pretty select population of the kind of people we like to live with in Holland. I think that by and large that conservative background still pervades the community's attitudes and reactions toward the development of the community. And I think that still provides the direction that people tend to go, that is, in favor of institutions such as government and education and higher education and church, rather than this desocialization that seems to have taken place in larger cities like Detroit. I don't
know whether I've answered your question very well. At the museum they're making a big effort to include the Hispanic population in the community in terms of museum programs and activities, because the size of the population of the city is approaching 20% of Hispanic background. And yet they participate very little in the programs specifically directed at them and the displays that we thought might be of interest to them. So I really think we're still working on amalgamating these diverse sections of the community. But I think the effort is worthwhile and I think we should continue to make that.

EB: The role of women. How has that changed in Holland?

JP: (Laughs) One of my favorite subjects! One of the things that I've been concentrating in terms of my research in Holland is to bring to the attention to the reading public at least the contribution of women here in Holland because it has been significant, both in terms of the town and in terms of the church and the college. And so I've written a number of short biographies of women, and they are on file both at the Museum and at the Archives so that if some scholar of the future wants to know briefly the contributions of some of these women to the larger life of this community, they will be able to find them easily. For a time, and this was true not just of Holland but of every community, it seemed as if the men wrote the history of the community. I suppose this is to be expected because women didn't get the vote here until 1920 really. That was the first election they could vote in; they got the vote in 1919 in the United States. But up until that time, women weren't hardly even referred to in legal documents. They were referred to as "Mr. Wood's wife." So they didn't have much
of an identity of their own. I believe, as is true with all wars, the First World War as well as the Second World War and the succeeding wars have made a great difference in the role of women. Once you take women out of the kitchen and allow them to participate fully in the life of a community politically, economically, scholastically and so on, you can’t stuff them back in the kitchen. They won’t go! I think modern marriages where the men take as much responsibility for feeding and caring for the children as the women do, are all to the good because I think the good Lord gave us two parents for a real reason. I don’t think a single parent does as good a job with children as a two parent couple does. And yet I think it is possible to raise happy, successful children and both parents work if they are equally dedicated to their children’s future. I see it is important for women to feel that they can both contribute to the world of work and learn something from it. I think it’s very important for a woman to feel that she does not have to be trapped in an abusive marriage or shackled to caring for parents as they enter senility, if she has the talent to go to work herself in something that’s more personally satisfying and to hire people to do whatever she does not feel particularly excited about doing. I just feel that it’s important for women to feel as free as men do to make a success of their career. At the same time, it’s important for men to realize that they have an obligation to their wives and their children if any in making a go of the marriage or a go of the family. I think we’ve come a long way, and I hope equality continues to weigh in favor of the more equal kind of lifestyle.

EB: I agree. Do you notice a generation gap here in Holland?
JP: Maybe I'm just not very aware (Laughs).

EB: You don't think there is?

JP: I don't think there is, but you know I could be wrong. I certainly noticed the generation gap when my own children were living at home. My boy was into heavy metal music which I never did understand, and I told him I did not wish to hear it myself. He was welcome to play it on his own radio or with his own earphones, but forget turning it on in the big speakers in the living room. I can remember coming home from work and hearing about a block down the street this booming, heavy metal music which by the time I turned into the driveway at home had been completely silenced. And yet I knew it was coming from our house! Nobody else had teenagers in our immediate block. So I don't know how successful I was with my own children, except that I think the pendulum has swung back myself and that, thank God, my children did not come to maturity in the sixties. I think that was a very upsetting and difficult time for the entire country, but most of all for young people in college or of that age. I don't think they could understand what was going on in the world as many adults couldn't either. I think we've gotten to a different time now where we all understand the benefit of better worldwide communication. I remember hearing Wendell Willkie talking about "One World" and what a dreamer he was thought to have been in that period of 1939 and 1940 just before our entrance into World War II. But Wendell Willkie was a businessman and he could see the writing on the wall. The only way for us to make it economically was for us to engage in worldwide trade, and I think that's the point we've arrived at. I think it's interesting
that China feels that its undemocratic to insist that other countries adopt a democratic form of living. I wonder exactly what their leader's concept of democracy is.

Having been to China, I think they have a long way to go. And politics is the least of it. Economically they are a very depressed country. Japan has invested heavily in China. I don’t know whether that has anything to do with the recent stock market drop in Japan, but it will be interesting to see how world economics plays out and what part that has to do with the stability of the Far East. I still would rather have been born an American than any other nationality I can think of. And that feeling is only reinforced as I travel a little bit around the world and see how the ordinary people in other countries live. We were extremely fortunate in this country to have been born here.

EB: I know you haven’t lived in Holland your whole life. But how have you seen the problems and concerns of Holland throughout the years - especially in the last fifty years - changed?

JP: I think one of the things that Holland has had to deal with (and I think they have been more successful then a lot of communities) is in coping with explosive population expansion. I remember when GE established their plant here. There had been some other businesses established here but mostly they were established by local people. For example, the Haworth industry. Meijers Foods got started about the same time. And Herman Miller had really gotten going after World War II with its furniture and other designs for contemporary homes. But GE was really the first "outside" industry to come in here. They had imported people to be the managers and the supervisors in
the plant here and the first people who would work here from all sorts of other parts
of the country. In a way, it must have been the same as when Hope College started
and found that in order to provide an education for their own Dutch background
children they had to import English-speaking professors from the colleges in New
York and New Jersey in order to educate their own children. So it must have been
sort of the same kind of process that had to be undergone. By and large, I think it's
a tribute to the Dutch mentality which always has been in favor of trying new things.
They have that reputation in Europe. They are probably one of the more liberal
countries. They're a small country but very influential, simply because they were
well educated and outgoing. And I think those qualities stand this community in good
stead today. The people who are the leaders, many of them still have good Dutch
names (laughs). And yet they're in step with everything else that's going on in the
rest of the world and able to see Holland's role in this larger community be it state,
national or international. I think it's very interesting that several of the companies
that are based right here in Holland are international now in scope. I think that must
have been in the Dutch genes, so to say, that were explorers and so on in years past.
Most of the changes I think are related to the population growth, and it means not just
amalgamating a new population into the community, but it also means such things as
housing and schools. The town's boundaries have grown since I first came here and
also the school system is greatly enlarged. And that has meant changes. I was aware
of the changes in the school system because my mother-in-law substitute taught for
about twenty years after I became acquainted with her. In fact, I even spent one day
with her as part of an assignment for one of my college courses and learned how hard schoolteachers worked. Also over the years I’ve watched the government cope with such things as expanding their water and sewage supply and the ability to provide electrical power to the community and so on. By and large, I think they’ve really coped very well. They’ve also sent very appropriate representatives to the various legislatures to represent the viewpoint and interests of Western Michigan. But I think for so long Detroit dominated the thinking in the state that perhaps now that Detroit is no longer quite as significant politically, it’s actually a more balanced economy statewide that does not rely solely on the auto industry and its economic fortunes rise and fall with that one industry. In general, I think there’s been a real improvement in economic conditions in this area. After all, how can you quarrel with success?

EB: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life?

JP: Probably when I had children. And probably the second more than the first. I watched a TV show on Gloria Vander Bilt last night. I’ve always been interested in Gloria Vander Bilt. She’s a very interesting person. She married into one of the wealthiest, oldest families in the country and was accustomed to a very wealthy lifestyle. Yet even that amount of wealth was not sufficient to protect her from life’s hard knocks which began when she was a very young child. And yet she’s endured! She’s survived, and she’s not only survived but she’s successful as a person and as a career woman. She said on this TV show though that she felt perhaps there were some women who were not intended to have children and perhaps her mother was one of them. I do think that being a parent takes a lot of skill, and you don’t really know
whether you have the skills to do that until you start trying to be a parent. It’s nothing that you can even get a license for. I do think that we all try our best with our children but sometimes our best just doesn’t quite do it. Our son was diagnosed when he was about in the third grade as being a hyperactive child. This was long before there were any laws that provided extra educational resources for him. Really what saved him and us was the fact that we were in an excellent school system with the ability to judge correctly when a child who was not doing well academically needed extra help and to be able to point the parents in the direction of the appropriate help. Our son is probably minimally affected, always was minimally affected, but it made a great difference to us. The school system helped us get him correctly diagnosed and then provided extra resources for him that helped him not only complete his secondary education but go on and graduate from college. And I think we would not have seen that he had that potential if we hadn’t had some very good guidance from a child psychiatrist early on. And in the case of our second child, she had a physical abnormality which caused her to have recurring bladder infections for the first two years of her life. And during part of that time at least I had a male pediatrician who was about the age of my father. In fact, he was a friend of my father’s, who was very unsympathetic to mothers. He was all for children but he wasn’t much on mothers. And I think I would have found that very difficult to deal with if we had continued to live where we did at that time. I had the opportunity to switch to a female pediatrician who had been a nurse before she was a physician, who had a family of her own and who understood perfectly well that there are lots of
reasons why a perfectly well thought out prescription for a medication for a child might not always be given in the appropriate way and at the appropriate times in even the best of organized households. (Laughs). So I think raising children is not easy and I think that a single parent cannot do it alone. I would not have felt comfortable without my husband to help me with our two children. I always said I thought the good Lord knew what He was doing when He didn’t give me ten children to raise because neither they nor I ever would have made it! (Laughs)

EB: Tell me someone important who has influenced your life here in Holland.

JP: My husband, of course, and his roots here. Yes, I think this has been a good choice. When we told our friends, especially those who had been thinking that we would move to a golf community, our decision to retire to Holland...I can remember one woman’s comment was that well, at least had the right last name for it, implying that Holland was still pretty much a closed Dutch community. And I’m sure that’s the way some people see it even today. I haven’t found it so, but that’s I’m sure because it has become a larger, more inclusive community in the forty years since I first saw it. And I’m grateful for that change which makes it a very comfortable community for me. I’ve often thought employers must find the same thing in having a work force with a Protestant work ethic. They seem to like to come here and they seem to thrive, and it definitely has contributed to the economic well-being of the community. So I can’t help to see that as positive in my own way.

EB: Well, I don’t think there is anything negative about it! Is there anything you would like to add that maybe we didn’t cover that would help somebody fifty years from
now?

JP: No. I just hope that the College continues to thrive because I think it’s a very important stimulus to the intellectual life of the community. When you read about the history of the educational system in this country, it’s the places where the educational system has been encouraged to thrive and grow that the economics have thrived and grown along with it. So, if that’s what you’re interested in (and it’s definitely what I am interested in), I think it’s very important.

EB: Anything else you’d like to add?

JP: Can’t think of anything. You’ve been very patient.

EB: I enjoy hearing the stories.

JP: Thank you.

EB: Thanks. (Tape ends)