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Rudell, Anita Oral History Interview:
Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Larry Wagenaar

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Oral History Interview with Anita Rudell

Conducted November 5, 1997
by Larry Wagenaar

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LW: Anita, could you state your full name and date of birth?
AR: It's Anita Rodriguez Rudell. I was born [date removed], 1959.

LW: Where were you born?
AR: Joliet, Illinois.

LW: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up. Did you spend all your growing up years in Joliet?
AR: Yes, my whole life until I got married. I was born and raised in Joliet, went to a Plainfield School, moved out of Joliet, moved to Chicago. I lived there for approximately eight years and moved back home after that to Shorewood, Illinois. Then I moved on to Holland, Michigan.

LW: Who were your parents?
AR: Espiridion and Consuela Moreno-Rodriguez. Moreno was my mom's maiden name.

LW: Were they born in the United States or were they immigrants?
AR: Immigrants. My father was born in Texas and had his U.S. citizenship through my grandfather, Rupert Rodríguez. My mother was actually born in Texas, I think Brownsville.

LW: What lead them to migrate to Illinois?
AR: Work. A lot of agriculture. The same thing with Michigan. They traveled to Michigan for work. They were seasonal pickers.
LW: Would they travel back then to Texas?

AR: They would when they were single, but when they got married they ended up staying in Joliet to raise a family. I think they needed that stability, instead of going back and forth - so they ended up staying Joliet, which was good for us.

LW: Even though this is the Holland Sesquicentennial Project, tell me a little about growing up in Joliet. What were the high points and what were the challenges?

AR: I’ll go by the challenges because I guess that sticks in my head. Growing up, being Hispanic, and pretty much growing up in a Caucasian so-called environment. We had basically three to five families in our community. At the time when I was growing up, I spoke Spanish. I guess the language barrier and not fitting in, not speaking English at the time, and not feeling that speaking Spanish was not acceptable which it wasn’t. The principal coming to our home and saying, "You’re in America, you speak English." That would be a down point, not really feeling accepted as far as a skin color or your culture. High point? In a way, coming from a poor family, looking to see beyond what we had, that there was something else better that you could achieve. I think that would be a high point, to achieve something more than what you had.

LW: Is that something your parents instilled in you?

AR: Yes, especially my mother, I would say in particular. She is a very strong Hispanic woman. She always emphasized, you have to have a good job and a good work ethic. I would say that on behalf of my mother. If you want something you have to work for it; nobody is going to give you anything free. That’s her quote - that’s her.
LW: Did you sense that discrimination was pretty consistent? Was there a lot of it in Joliet when you grew up?

AR: Yes, I'd say it was quite a bit. I never had any dates through high school. Just being called derogatory statements throughout my whole life so, until I really got out of high school. Then it was a little bit different. It was still always there; just a little different.

LW: Was it more subtle then?

AR: More subtle. You know, you have to get along. For being sued no one is going to say anything to you, so yeah, it was just a little more subtle. I found it very hard during teen years.

LW: What is your husband's name?

AR: John Pierre Rudell. Married a caucasian. (laughs)

LW: Tell me how you met him. Just a little bit about that story.

AR: I work for Commonwealth Edison, which is a utility company in Illinois. I worked at Dresden Nuclear Power Plant and he was an engineer out there. I worked in the Archive files doing things for the NRC with the company, but they had to supply that information to the NRC. We had to give out prints and drawings when they had the shutdowns. That's when I met my husband, at the power plant. That was twelve years ago. It goes by quick.

LW: In those twelve years, have you found, you mentioned that your husband is caucasian, has there been difficulty as far as other people looking at you? Have you run into people...?
Well, it’s kind of funny. My husband and I talked about that. I think people seem now to be a little more accepting of interracial marriages. A little more accepting of that. What I told him when he went to work in Joliet, "Don’t tell them you’re married to a Mexican," because it’s such a close minded society there. He would hear racial jokes and everything, and he finally told them one day, "My wife’s Hispanic." They were all kind of shocked, but you know, it doesn’t matter. It’s just a skin color. This is kind of silly, but that’s life I guess.

Unfortunately, that’s the way some people operate. You have one child. His name is?

Nicholas Alexander Rudell (repeats name using Spanish accent).

It looks like he was born on [date removed], 1990. And you were in Chicago at that time. Tell me what led you to decide to come to Holland, Michigan?

My husband is from the Grand Rapids area and he was laid off a couple of years ago. During that time, he sent out resumes. We were living in Shorewood. A year and a half later, it (job offer) finally came through. He loves the outdoors, and he just thinks Michigan is a beautiful state. And now living here, it is a very beautiful state. There is really a lot to do here - you’re close to the water, there’s biking trails. We like to hike and camp, and it’s just beautiful. It’s really pretty - a lot more to offer than Illinois, I would say.

Tell me what your first impressions were when you first came to Holland?

My husband was probably a little more hesitant to move here, because we heard a lot of derogatory - I don’t want to say statements, but not maybe fitting in, not being
accepted in a community that is very tight-knit. It is still kind of tight-knit we noticed, because we’ve lived here a year and half. We’ve got our first invitation to go over to somebody’s house for the first time. I invite a lot of people, but I think a lot of people can’t expand beyond their families. They get so busy with kids. I have one child, so maybe it is a little easier than it is with two or three.

LW: Have you run into any resistance in that regard in the last year and a half?

AR: We thought about it, my husband and I, and it’s kind of hard to say. I don’t know if it’s that, or like I said, people are so busy with heir own families and friends that they can’t expand beyond their circles. I don’t know.

LW: Obviously, Holland was pretty much the size it is today, do you have any thoughts on the growth patterns that you’ve seen? I mean, being in the real estate business - you probably see that more directly than a lot of other people.

AR: I think, actually, Holland is a pretty cool community. For being such a small community, I do see a lot of growth. Back home in Joliet, where I was born and raised in Plainfield, a lot of corn fields. People from the Chicago area where coming down and developing that. And that’s what I see here is that Grand Rapids seems to have a bad stigmatism. There are a lot of different people and ethnic backgrounds, which I like in bigger cities. But Grand Rapids is not that far for people to commute from Holland to Grand Rapids, so I think they are willing to sacrifice their time. It’s affordable housing here. It’s a big growth. I think it’s a pretty awesome community. There are a lot of community groups here that do a lot for the community. It’s very church-based, in a way. The organizations are willing to lend a hand out to make
this...I think it was nominated one of the ten cities. So that is a pretty awesome statement in itself. It was voted something. I should know. Top ten cities (for the downtown area) of the United States. That’s a pretty cool statement in itself.

LW: What organizations are you involved in in the year and half you’ve been here?

AR: I joined LAUP, which stands for Latin Americans United for Progress. I actually wanted to look for a Latino business organization, but I couldn’t find that so I joined LAUP. They are a non-profit organization. I’ve been with them since 1996. I just joined the Junior Welfare League. I joined that this year. So basically those two organizations. That’s enough to handle.

LW: Tell me your impressions of LAUP. What contributions does it makes to the community?

AR: Oh, a lot. As far as keeping your heritage for LAUP. They try to help out with school scholarships and questions. There’s a lot of migrant workers that come here. Helping them out. Better quality of living. Trying to raise the educational standards for Hispanics. They have done statistics. Just a good, positive organization to keep your heritage. They are trying to incorporate that within a Dutch community. They have La Pasada at the Holland Museum. A lot of things. They are a pretty cool organization.

LW: Have you been involved in Cinco de Mayo at all?

AR: No, well, I take that back. They don’t call it Cinco de Mayo. They didn’t want to call it Cinco de Mayo, but they have the Fiesta, because there are a lot of Cubans and other Latin American citizens. It’s just not Mexican. There’s Cubans and Puerto
Ricans, and so to group everybody together they just call it the Fiesta.

LW: That's right, I remember that now. You mentioned the church just a few moments ago. Is that something that plays a role in your life?

AR: Yes, more so, I think, coming from out of state and not having my family, who are there in Joliet. I think for anybody, but particularly a Hispanic person, I think the family, no matter if you have quarrels or whatever, I think you need that space to kind ground you. Coming here, not having anybody, you kind of feel locked out. I think church kind of helps soothe your soul. And plus having a child, I guess you need to get some focus as to what happens in life to give them a balance.

LW: Where do you attend?

AR: Central Wesleyan. We checked at the Catholic church. My husband went to a Catholic school and we attended Catholic church, but this is kind of nice. It has a little bit of everything for everyone there.

LW: It's a large congregation.

AR: Oh, it is.

LW: I'm always amazed when I drive by there.

AR: There are three different services that they offer.

LW: What kind of role do you think the churches play in Holland?

AR: Oh, like a lot! It's probably the number one thing. There's a lot of churches. A lot more churches than bars. It's not like Wisconsin. I think they play a very integral part of Holland. All joking aside, if you look you can go a mile and there is a church there. I think they pay a very key part to it. A lot of the corporations from what I
undersland are somewhat church based, or principles upon the church, not so much written out but it’s kind of there subliminally behind the scenes. I’d say an important part.

LW: This is a more difficult question. Tell me what impact, now that you have been in town for a year and a half, the Dutch element in Holland plays? Do you still think it is a dominant ethnic heritage, or has it subsided because of all the new immigrants and middle level executives and everyone else who is coming to town? Can you comment at all on that?

AR: It’s like any nationality. You try to hang to your roots. I look at it. I think it is changing, because you have different cultures and people from other states coming in here. I think they like that, but at the same time they want to change that. I know with the Dutch and the Tulip Time there is the big parade. It’s one of the largest ones in the United States. I didn’t realize that until after I went to the parade and thought, "Wow, this is pretty awesome seeing all these people from all these states coming down for Tulip Time." What is this Tulip Time? And it is really pretty cool. There is a lot of work and thought that is put into it. But, you can still feel a lot of the Dutch traditions in a way. There are a lot of places that are closed on Sunday. That’s good and bad. I guess you know that when you move here, so you learn to deal with it.

LW: What do you think are the impressions of people elsewhere? Either in Michigan, or mostly Michigan I suppose? You came from out of town, so you probably have talked to a number of people that have moved here.
AR: I think people are pretty impressed. I think you look at Holland and it is very clean, safe environment. I think it is a great place to raise your family. You’re so close to the beach, you’re so close to Chicago, you’re so close to Grand Rapids if you need the cultural thing. It’s all right there. I think it is a positive. I can’t see too many negatives as far as living in Holland. I think you seem to be centrally located to wherever you need to go.

LW: What do you think are the challenges that Holland faces at this point?

AR: It would be growth. I’d like to see a more positive inner-city. Homes and neighborhoods, and a little more diversity.

LW: There clearly is a growing ethnic diversity in the community, both Hispanic…

AR: Asian-American.

LW: Now Asian-American and some African-Americans in the community. Do you think that tolerance level has raised over the last several years or decade? You haven’t been there that long, but what are your impressions?

AR: It has probably raised a little bit. I was reading the paper that the Hispanic population is like 14% in Holland.

LW: How do you feel the status of women is in the Holland community today?

AR: I look at the Junior Welfare League. It is a pretty awesome organization. It is basically forty women. I think women play an integral part. I know there are other organizations that involve women. So I guess I look at it as a positive. I haven’t really got to meet a lot of people in regards to that as far as women. I just look at our organization. They work hard; they are just as equal to men I would say.
LW: Speaking of your time here in Holland, have you ever felt a barrier because you are a woman in your career aspirations?
AR: Me, personally? No, not really.
LW: You probably witnessed it for others.
AR: Yes, probably for others.
LW: Have you witnessed any controversies in Holland that have affected the community?
AR: Sure. I would say schools are a big issue.
LW: Tell me about that controversy. What is the substance of it?
AR: If you live on the north side, supposedly some of the schools are better than the other. There is a lot of parent participation, which is good. My little boy went to Waukazoo at the time, and there was some upheaval in the school. No organization is perfect. I think the schools are a big issue for people here, which they should be for everybody. The other thing as far as controversy that I would say...safety for families. The other controversy is there is a lot of growth here. People still want to keep that small town type of mentality, but want the bigger city but the small town type of atmosphere. You kind of can't have both, I think.
LW: So with the growth comes good and bad.
AR: Right.
LW: What's the first top three things people are interested in when they come into your office as far as real estate?
AR: A safe environment for their kids, schools, prices of homes (values).
LW: Since you deal with a quite a few Hispanic families in your real estate business, there
was a time in Holland when discrimination was pretty overt as far the housing market is concerned. Do you feel there are still vestiges of that evident in the community as you deal with real estate issues?

AR: Oh, yes.

LW: Tell me a little bit about that.

AR: It's a growing community. I notice that the city is really good about that, trying to help people who are underprivileged. There's a lot of help here through the Community Action House, tools, or whatever they need. The help is there. I don't know how long people have lived here, but maybe trying to get that information out to the people who live here. There is a lot of people who are renting. I also own rental income. A lot of people come in here having two families live together, because they can't afford the rent. It is kind of high. It's not really affordable housing. It's hard to find anything decent for $50,000. It's almost impossible. Any home that you find for $30,000 and $40,000 - if you can find anything - it's going to need a lot of repairs. People just don't have that kind of money. I wish there was more help for them or programs that could help them. There are a lot of first time home buyers, but they just can't afford to purchase a home because the demand is greater than what is out there for affordability.

LW: I know that as a realtor you are obligated by law for equal housing.

AR: So are the sellers.

LW: In working with sellers, and I don't want you to name any one, but have you run into sellers who have been reluctant or who flat out want to refuse showing homes to...?
AR: No, not that I have. I haven’t, but maybe somebody else in the office has. If that was the case...

LW: You’d probably cease dealing with them.

AR: Yes, I would. I would tell them that it is ethically wrong and that it’s against the law.

LW: There was a time when that sort of thing occurred from the stories that we have heard. I was wondering if that was still that blatant in places.

AR: Not for me as of yet.

LW: That’s good news. Do you think there is a perceivable generation gap in Holland?

AR: Between older citizens and...Well, yes and no. I went to Freedom Village the other day. It’s a pretty nice place. I was really surprised. I went to a little craft show. I realized that there are a lot of senior citizens there. I feel that there are a lot of young people moving in here. It’s like when you are younger you want to get away from wherever you live, but when you have a family you reassess it and think, "You know, that wasn’t such a bad place to live - it was kind of safe." I think people kind of move back to that. I think Holland has had a pretty positive image around it.

LW: What draws you to Grand Rapids when you go?

AR: Probably the more cultural things. The museums, different stores, the shopping. Just having the cultural diversity.

LW: What kind of contribution to you think Hope College has played in the community?

AR: To the community? I think that it is a pretty integral part. If you look at it, it’s based pretty much in the downtown. I think an important part. I’ve heard that it’s a
very good college. It's a liberal arts school, right? It keeps the downtown alive. I think when parents come down here, I think they have a sense of feeling okay with their kid being here. It's kept very clean and I know they had a new center put on. It's pretty impressive for a small town. There’s a lot of money that’s here that you just don’t see, but it is here.

LW: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life, and that doesn’t necessarily have to be in Holland.

AR: Turning point in my life? Getting to be forty. I will be thirty-eight Friday. I guess reassessing your life. What is important to you in life. Having a child, that really does it. You want to accomplish something. When I die, what did I leave as of value to the community or to my son, to instill compassion, generosity, and ethical things for him? Live what you preach, or preach what you live, I guess the saying is.

LW: What are your thoughts on the new area center?

AR: That’s the ice skating rink that’s going in, that I should know about?

LW: There has been some controversy as to the location - whether it should go here on the GE site, which is just adjacent to your property here at Woodland Realty, or downtown. Are you familiar with the issue at all?

AR: Kind of. Personally, I think that it should go downtown. I love 8th Street. When I think of Holland, I think of 8th Street. That is like the essence of Holland. I guess, five years ago, that it wasn’t going as well. I think as far as quality, downtown Holland has it. There are a lot of neat little stores and specialty shops. I think it’s nice to keep the money in the city. It’s a safe place. It’s a need. There is a need
here. I guess there are a lot of people that want the ice skating rink. There is a new spot that opened up called the Soccer Spot, and it just has overflow. So the need for activities is really needed here. You really have no place to go. It is definitely a need, and I think that it is a positive one.

LW: Are you familiar of the proposed redevelopment of Windmill Island?

AR: Yes, I've kind of heard about that.

LW: What are your thoughts on that concept?

AR: I know they had a hard time during Tulip Time to try to draw people there. I forgot what the expense was, but for the average... A lot of people that live here have never gone to Windmill Island. I went there recently when we had Tulip Time. It was pretty awesome. It's a great place. It is like a little diamond in the rough. You kind of need to go down there. To think that you look at this big windmill, and to think how it was made! To see it still in action - it's just really cool. I think the average people that live here just don't want to spend that money to go see it, because they live here. You take it for granted a lot of times. For someone who is coming to visit, you spend the extra money and do your tourist thing. They need to have something else besides the windmill to draw local people there. It's pretty impressive.

LW: Holland has been recognized as one of ten All-American cities recently. What qualities do you think are in Holland that warrant this honor?

AR: A lot of community support. Being by the lake helps and the beauty of that. Accessibility to people. Like I said, you have Chicago, Grand Rapids close by.
There are a lot of activities outdoors if you like biking, hiking, or snowmobiling. It’s all right here. Other qualities - it’s clean. There’s a lot of industry here. They keep everything nice and clean. There seems to be a lot of help for employees. They try to draw locally here. It’s an established community.

LW: Are there any other thoughts you have that maybe we didn’t touch on?

AR: No, just in general, like I said, I think Holland is a good community, and I think it will always be that way. There seems to be a lot of key people here that will always continue to try to keep Holland that way. There’s a lot of growth going on, and there seems to be a lot of restrictions as far as building going on. It’s kind of hard, because at the same time, you are kind of busting at the seams and development is going to happen whether you want it or not.

LW: What kinds of restrictions do you see? When you say that, what are you thinking?

AR: I look at Park Township because I live there. A lot of people like to keep it the way it is now, and not have the development. There are a lot of blueberry fields there. There is a lot of subdivisions going in. Right now at this time, the market is slow so there is a lot of development going on, and really is the need there? The need, that I look at, is that we need to get more affordable housing for people, if it’s possible, between $60,000-80,000. I know the modular homes are real popular and trailer homes are popular. If you look at someone who is either divorced or is making a minimum wage, they have to live someplace. Everyone wants that dream of having a home. Whether it is a modular home or a trailer, it is a home for them. It’s the American dream. It is still there, you just need to make it a little accessible to
people. You need something that is a stable home that is going to be permanent and that will be hopefully made well, constructed well for the money, and it's going to be more permanent. Because there are a lot of families here in need of that. That's the only thing I can see as far as housing here. It is attracting a lot of people. People are coming from Chicago down this way because of the work. The work is here.

LW: That's right. With an unemployment level as low as we have, it is going to attract a lot of people.

AR: Yes. The thing is that there are high end jobs here, medium income, and low income jobs, so there is something for everybody. In order for a company to succeed, they are going to need the lower to medium end people in order to make a profit, to succeed. I think either the company needs to develop something to support that or maybe the community. There are a lot of apartment buildings going up, but I don't think that is the answer to the problem.

LW: Well, I think we covered all the things that I had in here. Probably, one other question I would ask is, "Is your son just starting school now? Is that right?"

AR: Yes, he was in kindergarten last year and he's in first grade now.

LW: Are you pleased with the educational experience that you see your child having?

AR: Yes, we just moved him to Rose Park Christian School. We liked Waukazoo School, but we ended up sending him to Rose Park for a variety of reasons. All you can do for your child is try to do the best you can as far as education, and whether he uses it or not, it is up to him. I feel that is my obligation to him in life - to give him a good education. From there it is up to him.
LW: What reasons led you to go to Rose Park from Waukazoo?

AR: Again, there is a lot of controversy when you get into the high school level. I just wanted a good education for him. At the time, we were in the process of trying to figure out where we were going to move again. So I didn’t want to move him again because it’s hard for a kid. In Illinois, that was his home town, so I figured this would be a medium ground. And it’s a good school. I think religion never hurt anybody. Just to give a better feel for life and morals. Education, whatever that middle ground is, to keep you focused in life. That’s one of the reasons.

LW: Like I said, I think we’ve covered everything, unless you have something else you want to make sure we get on the tape?

AR: Holland is a good community and it’s growing. There are a lot of people here who are looking to make it succeed, and I think it will because there’s a lot of participation.

LW: Thank you for your time today, Anita.

AR: You’re welcome.
Initial Contact Form

Name: Anita Rodriguez-Rudell

Date of birth: [date removed], 1959

Place of birth: Joliet, Illinois

Mother’s name (include maiden name): Consuelo Rodriguez (Mireno)

Father’s name: Espericano Rodriguez

Siblings’ names (include birthdates if known):

Spouse’s name (include wife’s maiden name): John Pierre Rudell

Date of marriage: October 5, 1985

Place of marriage: Chicago, Illinois

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

Nicholas Alexander Rudell - [date removed], 1990, Chicago, Illinois

Date of death: Place of death and burial:

Religion and church membership: Catholic - Central Wesleyan Church

Schooling and/or other training: High school, some college courses

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

Holland, Michigan - 1 1/2 yrs.
Skokie, Illinois - 4 yrs.
Chicago, Illinois - 8 yrs.
Plainfield, Illinois - 23 yrs.

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

Woodland Realty - Jan. 1997
Coldwell Banker Bell - 3 1/2 yrs.
Metropolitan - 3 yrs.
Commonwealth Edison - 8 yrs.

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

Latin Americans United for Progress
Holland Family Welfare League

Other general information:

Now to area