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Schipper, Howard and Marybelle Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interview with
Howard and Marybelle Schipper
Holland Residents

Conducted October 7, 1996
by Gordon G. Beld

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
GB: This is an interview with Howard Schipper and Marybelle Schipper for the 
Sesquicentennial Oral History Project of the Joint Archives of Holland by Gordon Beld 
at the Schippers' home, 714 State Street in Holland on October 7, 1996, at 10 a.m. 
Howard and Marybelle, if you could start out maybe, just giving me a little bit of 
background about yourselves--where you were born and raised, when and where you 
met, employment that you had in the past, when you came to Holland, some of those 
kinds of things.

HS: OK. I was born in Holland, Michigan, on [date removed], 1930, living on West 16th Street 
near Van Raalte Avenue, which was pretty much the limits of the city at that point 
because Van Raalte was still a gravel road when I was a little boy. And I grew up in 
Holland, attending Holland Christian Schools, both elementary and secondary and 
graduated in 1948 and went on to Calvin College, and between the freshman and 
sophomore year of college is where our paths intersected with Marybelle who was born 
in . . .

MS: Holland, Michigan. I attended Holland Public Schools and became a teacher and did 
some graduate work at Grand Valley. Later on, when we were in Grand Rapids, I 
grew back to teaching, and that's when we became involved with the refugees, the 
resettlement of refugees.

HS: We courted and dated for about five years, from 1949 to 1954. The last two years' 
time after I graduated from college I was sent to Korea. I was in the Korean war, 
returned in 1954 to Holland, Michigan, where we married and we both engaged in 
teaching, operating out of Holland. We lived in Holland then for some seven years 
while I taught school at Holland Christian, and she was teaching school. The situation
was interrupted with a call to ministry in 1961 when I entered Western Theological Seminary and graduated from there in 1964. We took our first pastorate in Lansing, Michigan, where we served for five years and then in Grand Rapids at Bethany Reformed Church where we served for nine years. Following that it was church administration jobs until retirement. I served the Regional Synod of Great Lakes (what was known then as the Particular Synod of Michigan) for the second half of my ministry career which spanned about three decades.

GB: This is the Reformed Church?

HS: The Reformed Church in America, right.

GB: How was it at that point that you became involved with refugees?

HS: OK, it was while Mrs. Schipper and I were at a conference at Bob Schuller's church, the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, in 1975, when we first became aware of what was happening in terms of a refugee outflow from Vietnam. The newspapers were full of it that particular week we were there, and on the very day that Saigon fell--April 30, 1975--we were on our way back from California to Grand Rapids, Michigan, having attended Bob Schuller's conference where the theme was "If you want your church to be successful and have some impact, find a need and fill it. Find a need and fill it. Well, at that time the climate of receptivity toward refugees was pretty dim. There were two presidential hopefuls, Jimmy Carter and George McGovern, both of whom were running around California at the time, saying not such nice things about receiving refugees, while our own President Ford concluded something different--took a very unpopular decision to do something. Well, on the way back on April 30 we were boarding the plane in Los Angeles, flying to Chicago
together with a group of Vietnamese orphaned children who had survived the crash of the cargo plane in the rice paddies of Vietnam some weeks earlier. They were being escorted by some Roman Catholic sisters to Boston, Massachusetts. And we just looked behind us and saw all these little refugee kids and mused about what the Christians ought to do in this nation to respond to the needs of refugees and decided, on that flight between Los Angeles and Chicago, that we would do what we could. We talked about getting one planeload to Grand Rapids. If it would contain about 250 refugees and we'd get about fifty churches to sponsor them and about five people per family, we'd have a Grand Rapids share of response to this whole business. We called that "Freedom Flight," and we came back to Bethany Church that Sunday and sat in a Sunday School class and shared this idea with the class. And it just caught on that morning. Well, that particular evening I had a pulpit supply over in a Christian Reformed Church, Burton Heights Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. So I said, "I won't be here to talk about it." "Well," they said, "we'll talk about it." So the members of that Sunday School class which included people like Randy Disselkoen, Dave and Karen Zwart, and Don Vos and his wife, and a bunch of other young folks from that church decided they would simply expose the congregation to the idea--let's get 50 churches together and let's sponsor some refugees. They were arriving, we knew, in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and a number of other places and we wanted to do something. So the congregation said, "Yes, let's do it." And I had shared the same thing at Burton Heights Christian Reformed Church that night and they came up to me afterwards and said, "We've got a hymn sing here tonight and we've been wondering where to send the collection. Do you mind if we give the collection to Freedom
Flight?" I said, "No." That was the first money base that we had for anything. And the congregation back at Bethany responded very affirmatively that night. In fact one of the members, Dr. Bill Ver Meulen, a dentist in the Reformed Church who got Gerald Ford started in politics, volunteered to do what he could with the State Department that week because he and his wife, Wilma, were going to Washington, D. C., to attend the State Department dinner at the invitation of Gerald and Betty Ford. And he called us that week from Washington, D. C., from his hotel room, and he said, "Wilma and I are just going off to the dinner." And he said, "We've shared this stuff with Betty Ford's secretary and other people in the State Department. They like what they hear. They want a telegram from you." So we sat down and talked about it. But Bill said, "I want to warn you that anything you say ought to be doubled because the feds usually just cut things in half. So you double whatever you think you're going to do." So we sat down and we proposed through a telegram which we sent off to Washington, D. C., and indicated that we were building a coalition of fifty to one hundred churches to resettle up to one hundred refugee families. We had already known because the Sunday School class got on the telephone and they were calling churches to say, "Is there a support base out there? Would you, if we got refugee families here, support one?" And we knew that we could in all likelihood get fifty churches out of the 577 churches that were in Grand Rapids. The prospect looked good. And Bill Ver Meulen came back all enthused. We got a telegram back from Washington, D. C., congratulating us from L. Dean Brown, from the State Department, and it said, "Anxious to see what's going to happen" and they would be in touch with us in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and the project was a go. And they said to
resettle a hundred families. They didn’t cut it in half at all! They just assumed we were going to do a hundred. Within two days I’d gotten a telephone call from Henry Webb in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, telling us that he’s got a hundred families there, and when do we want them? I said, "Slowly!" We knew that something was really big afoot. And that’s where Freedom Flight really got its birth—with a committee that was formed then out of that Sunday School class called the Freedom Flight Committee which decided this was what they were going to do.

GB: That was in 1975?

HS: Yes.

GB: And then you established some offices. I remember you had one, I think, on Cherry Street. Was that the first?

HS: It all followed out of it.

GB: You want to get into that a little bit, Howard, as to how that came about?

MS: We first had English classes in the basement of Bethany Church, and that was through the Grand Rapids Public School System. They came on board to assist because they knew they would need English. We probably had maybe five or six classrooms going there at different levels. And then later we moved to a house that the church owned, and that’s where we had our refugee center.

HS: The events moved very, very quickly that first month. I just reviewed some stuff that I had written early on to refresh my mind, and these facts stick pretty well, I think. On May 23, within about twenty days of the idea being uncorked and developed, there was a coalition of people brought together by the superintendent of schools, Phil Runkel, in Grand Rapids. Phil Runkel had been approached by one of the members of the
Freedom Flight Committee, Mr. Bob Stouten, and he said, "Refugees are going to come to Grand Rapids." The Grand Rapids Press was announcing it and publicizing it. And he said, "That means refugee kids. That means we've got to do something in this community." So Phil Runkel called a coalition of people--from industry, from labor, from the Red Cross, from voluntary agencies, anybody who might have something to do with it. And there were about a hundred people that met on May 23, 1975, to plan the receptivity toward refugees in the greater Grand Rapids area. That group then became the governing committee. They formed what was called then the Freedom Flight Task Force. And a group of eighteen people out of that hundred conferees were to superintend and coordinate everything that was happening. The very first locus of that information flow was going to be at the Red Cross headquarters, and within a matter of days it had moved to Bethany Reformed Church where the coordinator of bilingual education, Dr. Rudy Martinez, and Phil Runkel and Tom Wenger from the Adult Education Department all got together and we forged English classes to be taught in Bethany Church. And that became then the center of operation for that year. Then subsequent to that, we moved to some other locations in the area.

GB: Now, administratively, getting that thing going took some staff. You were the pastor of the church at the time.

HS: Yes.

GB: Did you also then take over the leadership of Freedom Flight?

HS: Yes, they elected me immediately to be the chairman of the Freedom Flight Task Force, and I engaged in all that stuff as an avocation in addition to the pastoral duties during the course of that time. And, in fact, that's the way it has continued ever since,
for twenty-one years.

GB: You’ve had some other staff full time?

HS: Well, we did engage in hiring some of the Vietnamese staff who became either part or full-time persons who would be engaged in administrative activity. We had a young Chinese gal, Annette Ma, who became the first kind of coordinator. She was a person of Chinese ancestry and had a family, Chinese-Vietnamese family in Vietnam, and they came out and joined her. But there were other volunteers, mostly it was a staff of volunteers and workers or community agents who naturally had some of this fall into their portfolios—like Dr. Martinez in bilingual education.

MS: Since all refugees had to come through a national voluntary agency, then we hooked up with Church World Service whose main headquarters is in New York and that’s ultimately how we got the refugee flow, through them. They would call us with the refugees that were available, and that’s how we finally matched up refugees to churches.

HS: See, it was our first thought that the flow of refugees would end with the 1975 exodus, and they had known that there were going to be about 125,000 people. They billeted them in Pendleton, California; at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; in Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania; and a place in Florida near Pensacola. And from those places they were worked out into the sponsoring communities through primarily three voluntary agencies—the LIRS, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; United States Catholic Conference; and Church World Service. We linked, of course, naturally, with Church World Service.

MS: We had a hundred-mile radius that we could work in around Grand Rapids, so that
included Holland, Zeeland, Muskegon, Lansing, Kalamazoo. We even have gone up as far as Traverse City to place refugees.

HS: In recent years. Initially the contacts were primarily with RCA and CRC churches. One of the operatives under the CWS umbrella was the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee. They had placed people in the staff of Church World Service facilitators in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and in Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. So that, as this thing caught fire and more people became sponsors, the agencies that did that here were Church World Service and CRWRC and, late in the game, USCC. So by the end of 1975, when the last of that group of 125,000 refugees was resettled in the United States, the Grand Rapids area had done its share by sponsoring about one hundred and one family units. And of those there were--it was about evenly divided--thirty to thirty-three Reformed churches and about thirty to thirty-three Christian Reformed churches. There were about twenty-six other protestant denomination churches that sponsored, and twelve Roman Catholic parishes. Some of them placed through us, some of them through the USCC network. We did branch out into Western Michigan, and that’s where the intersection with Holland took place. And by the end of the year we had about eight hundred refugees sponsored in the greater Grand Rapids area, amongst whom were a couple of Holland churches. One of those churches, significantly, was Christ Memorial Church, which had sponsored more than one family in 1975. And that became the nucleus of people which became the magnet for drawing friends and relatives who came out in later waves of migration. But that’s where it all began and how it all began in 1975.

GB: I’m looking at some of these questions, and I think you’ve answered maybe some of
them already as to how Indochinese refugees came to the Holland area. Some through USCC, probably.

MS: That was later.

HS: Yes, that came later.

MS: And they came in about 1979.

HS: And they really became operative. What occurred is in the years right after 1975 you began to get some Lao and Cambodians along with the Vietnamese. And those new waves of refugees—which were really land-based refugees, or in 1979, 1980-81 they were boat people—then there was this rather full-blown organization, and now the voluntary agencies number to be about eleven across the United States. And the primary operatives here in Western Michigan were CWS and USCC. And they placed Cambodian and Laotian and Vietnamese relatives or free cases in the Western Michigan area.

MS: We figured that there are about three or four hundred Lao in Holland, three or four hundred Cambodians, and about two to three hundred Vietnamese.

GB: Presently?

HS: Presently, yes.

GB: Are any of those Lao, Hmong?

HS: Not very many.

MS: Some are in Lansing. But we did not get many Hmong in Holland.

GB: Are the numbers of Indochinese refugees in Holland, percentagewise, how does that compare with the average, if there is such a thing, throughout the country? Is that high or low?
MS: Well, in Grand Rapids we have about nine to ten thousand Vietnamese.

GB: Just Vietnamese alone, Marybelle, or all?

MS: In Grand Rapids we have mostly Vietnamese because we started with Vietnamese. We have very few Lao and Cambodians in Grand Rapids.

HS: But Holland is unique in the fact that it probably has about an equal base of Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese, which would be different from most places in the United States where you would have far more Vietnamese than you would have Lao or Cambodian.

GB: When these refugees came, did they—how did they happen to come to, let’s say, Holland in particular? Were they assigned here? Did they come here just because those two Holland churches were willing to take them?

HS: That would vary with each voluntary agency. With Church World Service, which is a congregationally-based sponsorship design, they came because here there were willing churches. And either they came because they were connected by family relationships with somebody already here, or they came as a free case to a willing sponsor, church sponsor. In a case of the USCC, where they operate more on an agency model, less dependent upon congregations, they came because they were allocated to that receiving unit of the affiliate in the area. In our case that happens to be the Catholic Human Development Office in Grand Rapids (CHDO). And they get whatever the run-of-the-mill allocation is. And then they have to resettle them. And they just find a place to put them.

MS: Initially, Howard went to Fort Chaffee and selected families to come. And that’s how we actually got our first families in Grand Rapids. Later on, when we were connected
with Church World Service, they would send us bios of maybe ten, twelve families at one time. And we would have contact with churches, and then we would let them select what size family they wanted. Initially, some of our families were ten, twelve people. Some churches couldn't handle that maybe, so then they might want a family of five, or four, or eight, or whatever--they would pick, and then we would try and match them with the size. Religion, we didn't really make that an issue, even though it was on the bio. A lot of our churches didn't even ask. But if they were Buddhists or Catholics they could go into a protestant church, and it didn't really matter.

GB: I think I kind of skipped over at the beginning, Marybelle, I know you're really a lot involved with Freedom Flight right now. When did that begin, right at the beginning or was it more later on?

MS: Right in 1975. And that's when we had a sponsorship developer that contacted churches, met with them, did orientation, and gave them a list of things to prepare for. And then after refugees came we were required by Church World Service to do a thirty-day followup and a ninety-day. So we were in close contact with those sponsors in making sure that all the followup services were adequate for the refugees and followed how they adjusted. And then part of our office, which was funded by the Department of Social Services from the State of Michigan, did the job development and found the employment.

GB: And you were involved . . .

MS: With the resettlement.

GB: . . . personally with a lot of that?

MS: Resettlement, yes.
HS: And Freedom Flight first was just a committee, for about a month. And then it became a task force, and then the operational arm of the task force became the Freedom Flight Refugee Center which was under the auspices of a Freedom Flight Corporation Board, a not-for-profit corporation which was developed early on. And that has been in existence ever since, to do both reception and placement and employment services.

GB: Are refugees from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam still coming. Would you talk a little bit about the flow and what’s happened to it?

HS: As of June 30, 1996—that was the cutoff date for the Indochinese Refugee Program—though there’s still a trickle of people who are connected to families here or who are eligible to come as refugees—that has been largely ended. All the refugee camps in Southeast Asian countries are technically closed, but some people still have to be repatriated back into Vietnam. The largest contingent of people is still in Hong Kong, and most of those people were escapees from North Vietnam rather than South Vietnam. The comprehensive plan of action which was adopted some months before June 30, 1996, was supposed to conclude that program. So for all practical purposes, as we sit here today in October of 1996, it is ended as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, and the doors are opened to many other nations such as Bosnia and Russia.

GB: So Freedom Flight is still very much involved?

HS: Still very much involved, yes. We have a diminished flow, fewer arrivals, but yes.

MS: My case management job over the years really changed from sponsorship development, in matching families to the churches, and then perhaps the last five years I got into immigration work where I helped the refugees that became citizens finally, and so on, apply for family members. So in Grand Rapids we still are working two days a week.
Our total two days is involved in immigration paperwork, applying for family members. We also help Laotians and Cambodians and Vietnamese out of our home here on our days off, to help them do paperwork so they do not have to travel to Grand Rapids. And it's all family reunion. We even find young men now wanting to go back to their countries to marry. And so we have to get their paperwork ready before they go, and then after they come back we help them apply for those wives.

HS: We discovered very early on, Gordon, that the best resettlement was going to be one in which you try to preserve as much of the extended family tie as possible. So we tried to attract extended families to Grand Rapids, and since their arrival we try to get their remaining relatives, wherever they were in the free world, to be rejoined with them. And, you know, that base of operation has been a philosophy that has been with Freedom Flight Corporation from the beginning, and we see that it just doesn't end here just twenty-one years later and we're still reuniting people.

GB: Back on the Holland area now, more specifically, would you say that in Holland there's more or less secondary migration of refugees, to leave Holland to go someplace else, than is typical?

HS: Well, I think the 1975 arrivals tended to be migrants more than later arrivals. Those who have arrived over the years tended to stay put more than the first ones did. But the first group was more elitist and more academically trained than those that succeeded them. And consequently they were moving around the country a little bit. And because they were scattered initially by the U. S. government all over the nation, you tended to get families and friends separated. In Holland, I think most everybody who came stayed.
MS: And we found that there have been a lot of second migrations into Holland, to join friends and family and because of employment opportunity.

GB: More so than most places?

HS: Yes, yes, more so. We have less migration here, less migration out, and more migration in than many other places do.

GB: You said you think that’s primarily because of the job situation?

MS: Yes, and I think that so many of them came from small villages or small towns that they prefer to live in this location—it’s near the lake; they like the water—rather than go into the larger cities.

GB: Could you talk a little about the support system for refugees, particularly in Holland, and whether or not it’s changed through the years—I mean sponsorships by churches, sponsorships by relatives or others, government assistance that’s available?

HS: I think the support structure is primarily through churches and has always been. What has occurred over the past twenty-one years is there’s been a gradual decline in interest. I don’t want to call it disinterest, but a decline in interest and an interest in other issues. People turned in the late eighties and early nineties more to the cause of homelessness than they did to refugee problems. And what was characterized by some as being compassion fatigue amongst churches or sponsors began to afflict, I think, the church scene here in Holland. You began to think, "Won’t the cause of refugees ever go away?" And people do turn their attention to other issues. So we have discerned, yes, there is more apathy toward refugees over the past two decades.

MS: That’s nationwide, though.

HS: Yes, nationwide. But in the Holland area, I think, there has been a lessening of interest
in refugee resettlement. Yes, it had been increasingly difficult to get sponsors, and there were a number of factors that contributed to that. But Holland has generally been good and receptive in quality ways. We didn’t get overwhelmed with huge, huge numbers and I think the population base has had generally good experiences with it and has just welcomed them in and become part of our social milieu of people.

[End of side one]

HS: One of the earliest responders was Graafschap Christian Reformed Church which was one of the earliest Dutch settlements in the Western Michigan area. It’s interesting that even today, right next to the historical room in Graafschap Church, there is a Cambodian church meeting and they are serviced by a graduate of Reformed Bible College; So Cheth Na is their pastor. They represent one of three basic Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao churches that have sprung up in the Holland area, which is indicative of the way in which the church community has been receptive toward them. There is Central Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Holland which has a Vietnamese Bible study worship group pastored currently by the Rev. Lap Duong. And there is a Laotian church meeting in Niekerk Christian Reformed Church. I think they first may have met in Pine Creek Christian Reformed Church, and they were bouncing around. But there are three basic churches: a Lao church, a Cambodian church, and a Vietnamese church in the Western Michigan, Holland community.

MS: And Catholic.

HS: And there’s a Catholic group meeting at Our Lady of the Lake now. So that indicates the kind of receptivity there is. And they all loaned them church facilities to meet in and giving rise to emerging congregations.
GB: Tied in with that, Howard, can we talk a little bit about the religious beliefs of the Asian immigrants when they come? Are they mostly Buddhist when they arrive here and do any, or about how many, might convert to Christianity?

HS: Well, Marybelle sees all the bios as they come which give religious preferences. What would you say, is the dominant group, ancestor worshippers?

MS: I would say that, and then you have your Buddhism and Catholics. Very few protestant, which we call the tin lanh church in Vietnamese. It was the Christian Alliance church in Vietnam. That was the protestant . . .

HS: They started it. That became the evangelical church in Vietnam, hoi tan tin lanh. But most of them were ancestor worshippers, Buddhist background. And were there a number of converts amongst them? Yes, I think that there’s an inordinate number of people amongst the refugees who become Christians, or certainly are strengthened in their Christianity, because of the refugee experience, having been bereft of everything they knew: language, culture, customs, home, and familiar surroundings, and translated to an alien place. You know, they are people who are receptive to considering other things. And there has been an unusual amount of conversions amongst the Southeast Asian populations.

MS: Yes. And the fact that they were sponsored through the churches. We have a record of about ninety-five to ninety-seven percent of our sponsors were church sponsors, which gave them a unique base of people--resource people as far as jobs, and support, and you find that there are usually two or three families in each church that really get close to the Vietnamese family. And then by watching their lives and what they do, they were drawn to the church. And there might be more that have become Christians
than we can imagine. We have really no way of knowing, but we know that there’s a
good number.

HS: We do know certainly that they were dramatically impressed by that, because in their
religious heritages, whether they be ancestor worshippers, Buddhists, or whatever, it
was not common, not common at all, for them to think that people would help them
freely, volitionally, and in such abundance. They wouldn’t have done that in their
country. They said to us over and over again, "If you were refugees and you came to
Vietnam, you wouldn’t find this climate of receptivity. But we came here and these
churches help us." And they’re amazed by it. And some of them, of course, were so
attracted by it they wanted to discover what’s the base and source of that love and they
became Christians through it.

GB: Can we talk a little about the cultural adjustment of Indochinese refugees, the cultural
differences that may have caused problems between them and other people in the
community, or between immigrant parents and children? Is that not one of the biggest
problems that they face when they come here?

HS: Yes, there’s the initial adjustment of all that cultural stuff. And Marybelle’s been very
close to that, both as a teacher of students and also as case manager for arriving
families and a go-between between sponsors and refugees.

MS: I think the hardest thing that they have to adapt to would be language. In ’75 some of
the more educated people had been working with the Americans, so they could speak
some English. When we got the boat people in 1980, very few knew English even
though they would get some English in the camps. That helped some. They got a little
bit of orientation in the camps. But basically their life is totally different. Their food
is different. They lived in different types of homes. They cook differently; they cooked on charcoal outside the home. And so when they came here we would tell the sponsors, "You take them to their apartments and basically go over every appliance. Go over everything they need to know." That took several weeks and months to learn all of that. They didn’t know what a vacuum cleaner was because they don’t have carpets; and so they had to teach them about the vacuum, how to change the vacuum bag and things like that. And then there was health differences. They had a tendency to treat themselves with home remedies, and when we would make appointments for them they couldn’t figure out why they needed to go to the doctor because they didn’t have a problem. Because in their country they always had a problem first, then they’d go to the doctor. A lot of dental problems, I think, because they didn’t have the right nutrition.

HS: There were the situations of the children sometimes—they’d be given the spoon treatment, and then they go to school and the teachers would think they had been abused, because they’d been rubbed with a spoon which was a way of getting at a cold or flu. And there were a lot of little interactions like that.

GB: Is that throughout Asia or is it predominantly Cambodian?

MS: Throughout Asia.

HS: Throughout Asia, yes. And then, of course, you get the other thing. There’s the initial adjustment, and then after they get adjusted and the children become acclimated very, very quickly, then you get the tension between the older generation and the younger generation—that first generation of refugee or immigrant people who begin to cast off the customs and the ways of their parents. And the parents feel that they’re losing their
kids. And you get that tension set up. We certainly have been there; we’ve seen that over the last decade.

GB: Is that more so the case with Asians than other immigrant groups, do you think?

HS: I think it’s true of every immigrant group.

MS: But I would say it’s pretty significant amongst the Asians, because they were very home-oriented. Extended family, you know, helps there. And then when those children didn’t go along with that culture and that whole family, it really caused a problem amongst all those people.

HS: Culturally, the Asians want education for their children, and so they push, they encourage, and the kids become high achievers. The more they achieve and the more they acclimate, the less they become like their parents. So it becomes a catch-twenty-two situation for the refugee families.

MS: Another problem we’ve seen is that when that second generation of children came then they didn’t retain their language. So when the grandparents and parents started to come, then those children couldn’t talk to the older people. And that’s been kind of a sad situation. So we’ve always encouraged Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians to maintain their language at least during parts of the day so that those children keep the language, so they could talk to the older people.

HS: The communities have been helpful in that, too, particularly the academic community. In Grand Rapids and Holland they established K-12 bilingual educational programs so that the kids would retain some of that skill in their natural tongue.

MS: In Holland and in Grand Rapids they have their Tet Festival which is the New Year holiday where they try and incorporate some of these cultural things, the dances, the
singing, so that's maintained there. And then in the church services they have a lot of their old hymns, I think, that were brought in by missionaries into that country before and they took them along--some of those are the same as our hymns, and they're in both languages.

GB: Can you discuss the racial tension that might be, say in the Holland area, or discrimination? Has there been any, or has there been none, or has it been about what you might expect?

HS: Between Hispanic and Southeast Asians or black and Southeast Asians?

GB: Yes, between any groups and Southeast Asians.

HS: It's been very minimal in this area, in the entire Western Michigan area, of racial tensions. There have been a few, very few incidences of racially motivated tension or antipathy toward refugee people. But to say that none of it exists, obviously, is to close your eyes. Sure, some of it does exist, but it isn't very dominant at all. And in reverse, I think, the reverse is true--that there's been an enormous amount of receptivity. We don't see tension between the black population and the Asian population in Grand Rapids. We see very little of that between the Hispanic and Asian groups here. It just doesn't exist. The host population, whether it be Dutch or whether it be ethnically mixed, in either case--Grand Rapids or Holland, or any other city--tends to be receptive. But it is by design, because we knew from the beginning that if they had a guest organization--which in our instance we made that the church--to be the filter through which they would be accepted in the larger society, then they would be acclimated and assimilated with a minimum of trouble. If you always have that buffer--if you wanted to attack that refugee, you've got to attack all of Central Christian
Reformed Church or all of this church. That congregation encircled them in love, and the rest of the population just concluded, "well, we gotta do that." There were some incidences early on when I would get telephone calls late at night, usually from somebody who was in a state of drunken stupor and was spouting off at the mouth in which I would get vilified for doing what I was doing, receiving refugees.

MS: You might add that if there have been some problems in Holland and Grand Rapids, we've known that some people have come out of Chicago and got connected with some people in Holland and Grand Rapids and there have been a few homes robbed of the Vietnamese themselves, and Cambodians.

HS: Of Asians perpetrating crimes on Asians, yes.

MS: But we have heard that they have come either from California or through Chicago.

HS: What helped Mrs. Schipper and myself, I think, to understand a lot of this stuff is that we were privileged in 1979 to go to Southeast Asia and visit the refugees right in the camps, at the height of the exodus of the boat people. We toured places in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and saw them in that environment. And we saw incidences of Asians exploiting fellow Asians—many, many, many of them at that point, both in the host countries and also right within the refugee communities. When you get thirty thousand people packed in a small island off the coast of Malaysia, you get all kinds of exploitation of one group of refugees over against the others, right in the same camp, in the same situation.

MS: Of course, that's survival.

HS: That's survival. But we were able to understand that. I went back again in 1981. We visited again in 1983, a few of them, and we've lived with that scene a long time so we
can interpret it a little bit differently. I know that the public might look at it and say, "Well, there's an American young man that hit an Asian young man in a bar in Grand Rapids and it killed him with that blow to the head. That's racially-motivated anger." But that's an isolated incident, and you can't argue from that to say that's what the community is like. Not at all. And we know that there were also some groups of unsavory characters that come through in the refugee flow that kind of provoked their own problems.

MS: Which would be true in any culture. Some good and some bad.

GB: Have there been positive influences that the Indochinese refugees have had on the community, particularly in Holland? What kind of impact have they had?

HS: Well, I think generally they come with an appreciation for family and education and achievement. They have demonstrated that you can be tremendously disadvantaged economically and socially and linguistically and still achieve if you're given the opportunity and you have the right kind of encouragement from family.

MS: I think they've helped a lot of our major companies here. We have a large number working at Bil-Mar, and Gentex, and Tyson Foods. A lot of them are working at those places.

HS: Great additions to the work force. Hard workers. They mostly become homeowners as fast as they can. That has helped. They are all, of course, taxpayers from the day they enter the country, contrary to some public myths that say they don't pay taxes and they're a drain on the system. And they certainly enrich this tapestry of cultural diversity that we have. They bring a lot of basic values, in some cases which Americans have lost and say they are good. They have contributed in a number of
different ways. I think their achievement, particularly this next generation that’s coming now—doctors, dentists, they’re becoming professional people, and many of them will be turning around and servicing the general population as an excellent and well-trained and very intelligent group of folks.

GB: Can you think of any impact they may have had on individuals in the community?

MS: Well, in talking to many, many sponsors, the sponsors have indicated that they have received the blessing by helping. And when they would get together in the groups from the church to prepare the apartments—they would have to paint them and collect furniture, put up the curtains and buy the food—they said that brought the whole church together. I’ve had many, many say that. And then over the years a lot of them have remained friends of those refugees, and those refugees still have them over for meals. And they still, even though they move to other states, will call back on holidays and write letters. So we have seen that connection, that initial connection, has been, you know, very successful in helping people.

HS: Many of the more forward-looking buildings in the Western Michigan area are now being designed by a person who is of Vietnamese origin. His wife came out in 1975 with their family, and he trekked out across the jungles of Laos and Cambodia into Thailand several years later and rejoined her, and he now is on the architectural staff of a local architectural firm and has designed some of the best-looking buildings in the Western Michigan area, I believe.

GB: He lives in Grand Rapids?

HS: He lives in Holland. He lives in Grandville, actually, but he works out of Holland.

You know, for example, the FMB Bank building and Westshore Mall which looked like
Dutch architecture were designed by a Vietnamese designer.

GB: What is his name?

HS: Tung Do.

MS: He also designed the new library in Zeeland and schools in the area, Grand Haven, a number of places around have all been his; the new Grandville library was his design.

MS: And the bank.

HS: A tremendously gifted person, and there are people like that that we know of in the community that have contributed a great deal.

GB: Can you give me few more examples of, particularly Holland residents, who have been successful in one way or another? Are there any others?

HS: I'd have to give that a bit of thought.

GB: Maybe not noteworthy, but who have maybe done well.

MS: Well, I know of a couple of the Vietnamese who, or it might be Cambodians, too, who bought real estate, houses, and are renting to other people. I know of one Vietnamese man who has five properties and works very hard to maintain them. He’s now building his new home north of Holland. He works at Haworth. So they’ve come from nothing in just a few short years and really made something of their lives.

HS: And it’s generally true, as we deal with them in immigration stuff, that we know--and can’t reveal any names here because of privacy--but we generally know that they have large amounts of money that they have saved, and that they have paid off vast portions of their mortgages. And they are economically very, very sufficient. We know that’s generally true.

MS: Yes, and they usually buy new cars, not used cars. They save their money so they can
buy a new car. And this all adds into the economy, too.

HS: There’s nobody that gives some kind of public evidence of their success, like the architectural designer that we mentioned, but there are many others who in very quiet ways are contributing. I think of the Vietnamese artist who, you know, who is contributing to the art in the area. There are others, I am sure, in sciences and in human services that are being trained and will become future contributors.

MS: Yes, we see more people now, coming out of the colleges in social work and nursing. Initially, it was all computers and math and so on, but now they’re going into more of the social work which we need, and that’s happening.

HS: And, you know, they achieve academic honors in high schools and in colleges and are becoming great role models for others. Can’t say, "Well, here’s a sports figure or a champion on a championship team or something like this that is highly public," but in very quiet ways they are doing leadership things.

GB: I think that pretty much exhausts my list of questions. Are there other things that you think of that you’d like to comment on?

HS: Nothing immediately comes to mind, particularly as it impacts Holland. We’ve always been proud of the record of quality sponsorships and activity that the Holland churches and people have engaged in and realize that it is a very vast cooperative effort of churches and schools and community to bring into its bosom a totally different culture and its people, to make them part of the mix that is Holland. But we’re proud of what Holland has done over the years, and when we moved back here eight years ago it was a community to which we returned, by choice, because that’s where we wanted to be in our retirement years.
GB: Thank you. Thanks a lot for your time.

[Interview ended, but participants recalled that they wished to comment on another facet of refugee resettlement and the recorder was turned on again.]

GB: Howard, tell us a little bit about the Amerasians and what happened there.

HS: OK. The first arrival of an Amerasian family was in the Grand Rapids area, but Holland figured in the reception of those Amerasians as well. The government of the United States did what they call an Amerasian Homecoming Act in which they opened the opportunity for those people who were fathered by American civilians or military personnel in Southeast Asia during those war years, to enter the United States. Well, one of the first people that came was a person that was found by Representative Hal Sawyer in a refugee camp in Southeast Asia, and we brought them to Grand Rapids. But Hamilton Christian Reformed Church we can mention as a local church which received one of the first of the many Amerasian children and their family members that came with them.

MS: I think we did about 250 families, and if you’d average say four in a family, could have been more or less...

HS: Yes, they’d often come with a mother and some siblings.

MS: Half sisters and brothers.

HS: And they were received very, very well by the churches. That was a whole other wave or flow after the boat people. We got the first wave in 1975, the boat people in '79 to '81, and the early 1980s on up until about 1990 were filled with Amerasians.

MS: And then we had the ex-political prisoners.

HS: And then the ex-political prisoners, the people who had been imprisoned in Vietnam for
more than three years and therefore became eligible because of their military or service connections and civilian life with the American government in Vietnam or American military. And if they had been in a reeducation camp, which is a euphemism for a concentration camp in Vietnam, they could be eligible to come with their families, and they came that way.

GB: Did some of those come to Holland?

HS: Yes. Yes, the HO prisoners did as well.

MS: Humanitarian Organization, they’re called.

HS: They had been persecuted and maligned so much, and their families back in Vietnam, but they became one of the more successful groups that were resettled because of their determination.

MS: I think what was so unique about the Amerasians was that they came in with just the single parent, the mother, and they might have had maybe four or five in a family. Most always they were never educated. They might have had one or two years of school because they were discriminated against in Vietnam.

HS: The Vietnam government would not educate them because they were fathered by Americans.

MS: So it was so great to see that the schools accepted them at that level and tried to pull them up. And then, as some years went by, they graduated from high school.

HS: And colleges.

MS: And colleges. Very unique. We have one young girl now that came in when she was twelve. She was what we call Afro-Amerasian, had a black father, and she came in without any schooling and started in and she graduated from high school and she’s now
at Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, and she’s going to be a nurse.

GB: Did she come into Grand Rapids or Holland?

MS: Yes, she came into Grand Rapids. But the family that came into Hamilton, that
Amerasian did attend college, I think three years. She didn’t finish, but she did go on,
too, and she was one of the honor students at Holland High School. Very, very
talented.

GB: Holland or Hamilton?

MS: Holland High School. She came and they later moved into Holland and they went to
high school here. So it’s been interesting. They’ve had some problems, but I think
because of the support of the churches and that really filled in the gap of not having a
father. I think it’s helped those families a lot.

HS: Now it strikes me what Holland has is a microcosm of refugee resettlement over all
those years. They have some evidences and illustrations of people from all the waves
of migration, of all the types out of Southeast Asia, and there’s some ones of every
group here in the Holland area: Lao, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese-Vietnamese,
boat people, the 1975 arrivals, Amerasians, HO prisoners. They’re all here.

MS: And before that Holland, years ago, did some resettlement of Dutch immigrants that
came later, from Canada, and they did Hungarians in Holland.

HS: And Cubans. But the Holland area, and for that matter Grand Rapids, the Western
Michigan area itself, has always been in the forefront of resettling or responding to
refugee and displaced people’s needs.

[End of interview]