Schutten, John Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Ann Paeth

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland
Part of the Archival Science Commons, and the Oral History Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland/117
Published in: 1996 - 1998 - Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years" (H88-0234) - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, July 1, 1997. Copyright © 1997 Hope College, Holland, MI.
Oral History Interview with
John Schutten

Conducted July 1, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
AP: Could you just state your name and when and where you were born?
JS: My name is John Schutten, I was born in Holland, Michigan on [date removed], 1928.
AP: Have you lived anywhere else?
JS: I lived in Wheaton, Illinois for three years, outside of that, I've been a native of Holland all my life.
AP: Why were you in Wheaton?
JS: I worked for Chemitron Corporation, which was the predecessor of BASF here in Holland, and I was vice president of operations for them.
AP: Reaching back, could you tell me a little bit about the different schools you went, grade school, high school?
JS: I went to grade school at Holland Christian, which, at that time, was on Central and 15th Street. I went to middle school and high school at Holland Christian, which was where the senior citizen center is now. I graduated from Holland Christian in 1946. When I left there, I went to Calvin College.
AP: What did you study?
JS: Business administration.
AP: Then, where did you go from there?
JS: While I was at Calvin, I went into the Service. I went to Officers Candidate School during the Korean War. Then I came home. I got married before I went into the
Service, which was a mistake, in a way, because I didn’t realize, being a small town, how tough it would be to find a place for my wife to stay when I got to the army base. It worked out well in the end. I guess the thing I remember the most in those days is that Holland Christian students and Holland High students didn’t talk to each other during the day at all. All Holland High students walked on the west side of River Avenue, and all Holland Christian students walked on the east side of River Avenue. I had some good friends at Holland High, like Ken Bausman and Zeke Piersman. We had a one hour noon, so we’d all walk down town, but we walked on the east side, Holland High walked on the west side. I never walked across to talk to them. I’d yell at them, wave to them. After 3:30, then we all played together. But it was a real tense period. We didn’t play sports against each other at that time either. There was an animosity between the public school and the Christian school. They used to call us the Christian school of Devils. I remember, we had some songs for them, too, we’d yell across at them. It was a period of very strong Christian Reformed influence, and of dislike for anybody Reformed or anything else, even though we’re almost exactly alike. I remember when I was younger, if I saw somebody at Trinity Reformed for a funeral, I thought, "Those poor people are not going to go to heaven." That was ingrained into our society at that time.

**AP:** Did you tend to have just Christian Reformed students at Holland Christian High, or Reformed, or both?

**JS:** There were both, but it was maybe 98% Christian Reformed and two or three percent Reformed. They were considered an oddity, if parents at the Reformed Church sent
them to the Christian school at that time.

AP: Was everybody pretty much involved in those two churches? Or did you have a portion of the population Catholic?

JS: No, I think at that time, that’d be about it. There might have been one. But not that I know of. It was really a Christian Reformed School, not that the school made it be that way, that’s just the way it was. It was a big sacrifice for parents to send their students to the Christian school at that time.

AP: Because they had to pay tuition?

JS: That’s right. There wasn’t a lot of church support to the school at that time. The Christian school is parental controlled, the parents control the school system. Even though it has a close relationship to the Christian Reformed church and a lot of Christian Reformed churches at that time took collections for it, but the church did not, and it does not today, control the school.

AP: Is that rather unique? I know a lot of parochial schools are very small and attached to one church.

JS: Yes, it’s very unique. This is parental controlled. If all the Baptists went to Holland Christian, they maybe could take over the school system there, because every parent that pays tuition gets one vote at a meeting. The church has really no control, although it has a great influence. Today, the school board is made up of a lot of different religions. The mix over there, there are quite a few Catholic students there, there are quite a few from all different churches. I think Christ Memorial Reformed has the single biggest group in the Christian School system, I understand.
AP: Did you have children?

JS: Yes, three. They all went to Holland Christian. Two graduated from Calvin college, and the youngest graduated from Albion. She went to Calvin for two years, and then went to Albion. I told the kids, I'm a strong Calvin supporter, I'll pay all your years if you go to Calvin for two years, then you can go anywhere you want. Our oldest daughter is head of the physical education department at Calvin, and has her doctorate, and is the volleyball coach there. Our youngest daughter just resigned last year as the swim coach at Holland Christian after a year.

AP: So they were pretty involved with sports? And pretty close to home, too?

JS: They are now. Our oldest daughter was out in California for quite a few years, at Dorton College in Iowa, then she got her doctorate at Indiana. Now she's back in Grand Rapids. My son lives in Grand Rapids.

AP: Could you describe what a typical day or what Holland typically was like going back fifty years ago compared to now?

JS: At the time, Krueger Store was the big store at Holland. Once a month they had handbills, like Meijer puts in the paper now. But we'd deliver them by bicycle. We went through Holland, but if you got around 22nd Street in Holland, it was just country from there on over, except for up by the Hospital there on Michigan. State Street, there were some black top roads, but it was primarily from 24th Street on all gravel roads and grey, open fields. Holland was a very close town at that time. On Sundays, kids didn't ride their bikes. They didn't put on old clothes and play. People who were considered liberal might take a ride in their car on Sunday afternoon.
out in the country. The town is what I'd call a typical small town type operation. Our population at the time was 20,000 to 30,000 people. Model Drug Store, I think, was the one place that was open on Sunday. There were no restaurants open on Sunday. There were no gas stations open on Sunday. It was a close town. At that time, you couldn't play in any of the city ball diamonds or play tennis. But you wouldn't, either. You didn't want to. But even if you did want to, you didn't want your neighbors to see you do it. They say, people couldn't wash their car on Sunday. That's about right. They could, but they'd get so looked down at by the neighborhood that they wouldn't.

AP: So out of respect for the day...?

JS: Well, out of respect or you didn't want to be ostracized by the other people. My dad was a builder. The big things changed in Holland with the second World War. Because of the war, some businesses opened on Sunday. Some helped the war effort, as they called it, and that's basically when women started going to work. I don't think many, if any, ever worked in a factory prior to the 1940s. A lot of fellows left Holland and went to the war and saw the other side of the world, and came back with a different viewpoint than what they were brought up with. Kind of kicked at the traces when they got back. When they first opened the city parks for play, it was a real major thing in Holland. The Churches all got upset about it for one week and then forgot about it. It was a very small town community. Everybody knew everybody. I maybe knew as many kids at Holland High as I knew at Holland Christian. It was a public opinion and or your neighbors perception that controlled
what went on in your life. You lived by that, which some people didn’t like.

AP: About how big would your class be at Holland Christian?

JS: We graduate in ’46 with the largest class in the school’s history of 64 people. We were not decimated by the war effort. We just missed the second World War draft. I think we had two people in our class... The class before us, out of 45, only had eight boys in it. They graduated with five, and all the rest were in the service.

AP: So just about the time when all of you became eligible was when the war was ending?

JS: When you became 18, or you graduated from high school, you got drafted. During that period of time, there was gas rationing, so you basically only got five or six gallons of gas a week or a month, depending on what you could justify. We were coming out of the recession at that time, and up until the war, none of us had much, but we all had a lot, because we didn’t know any better. We all had the same thing. I do a lot of volunteer work at the City Mission and a lot of the young fellows say, what was the recession like, or Depression, as some of them call it. It kind of was done by the time I got to know what was going on. But I never had anything, and neither did the neighbor kids. We just had fun. I never knew I was short of anything.

AP: A lot of people have said, they didn’t even realize they were in a Depression until afterwards when everybody said, that decade, that was the Depression. It’s just the way things were.

JS: In a way, they were good days. There’s a lot of people who lost homes. A lot of people who had big mortgages or were trying to get ahead. At that time, not many
people had mortgages in Holland. Hollanders have always been: you don’t buy it unless you can pay for it. That’s not the way of life anymore. We took care of each other. We had a little garden. If the neighbor needed something, we gave it to them. You knew everybody in your area and in your town. I was rather well known because I moved 28 times before I graduated from high school. My dad was a builder. I lived in three houses within one year. Where the Evergreen Commons is, there’s a red brick house they’re going to take down now. I lived there in 1941. In the white house on the corner, I lived in one night. Unloaded the mattresses, and didn’t take anything else off the truck. Next day, we loaded it up and we moved out, because my dad had sold the house. I had a good flare of all of Holland, because we lived all over Holland. We lived on the north side. We lived out on Graafschap.

We lived everywhere in town. They were good times. Any better than now? No. People say, what age would you like to be if you could choose any age? The age I’m at. I wouldn’t want to be a young person with what I see in this world today. Do I see it all bad? No. I think it’s wonderful. But Holland was unique at that time.

People came to Holland and thought, what an odd little town: no stores open, we were in town, we couldn’t get anything to eat anywhere. The drug stores were all closed. Movies weren’t open on Sunday. Nobody did much on Sunday except walk around, sit around, or take a nap Sunday afternoon. Yet, people kind of liked it. They’d come in here and complain about it, but still liked the uniqueness of the town. I think it’s so different when we go down to see the Amish over in Shipshewana. They’re unique. Would I like to live that way? No. It was a unique town, and Tulip
Time was a big thing. There were more bicycles. I saw this year they had some bicycles. We used to take our bikes to school about three days before Tulip Time and we’d decorate them, put cree paper through the spokes. You could really jazz up your bicycle with cree paper and fancy little stuff on it. Basically, I don’t think Tulip Time has changed that much except for the commercial end of it with all the people coming in here to sell. That I have a real problem with. I think we ought to limit the number of souvenir places. It’s getting to look more like a commercial venture than a community venture. Over the years, I don’t think Tulip Time has changed very much. Holland Furnace was the big company then, and they brought in movie stars and everything else at that time. Heddy LeMar and some of these big movie heros were brought into town, and we’d all go down town to see them ride through the parade. Very few of us went to movies. There were basically two movie houses, the Holland Theater and the Park Theater. If you’re Christian Reformed, movies were not something to go to at that time. So you didn’t want to be seen going in there. If you wanted to flaunt a little that you were kicking over the traces, you stood in line outside the movie house waiting for it to open. Generally, that was not done by Christian Reformed people. They might go out of town to go to one. (laughs) I travel all over the United States with the corporation. A lot of people don’t know where Holland, Michigan is. If you mention Tulip Time, they all know. They don’t remember the name of the town, but they remember the Tulip Time or have heard of Tulip Time. You can go anywhere. You can go down south or almost anywhere, and people have heard or been to Holland, Michigan. We were a unique community
and that is the reason it grew like it did was because of our unique labor force here. Honest, dependable, hard working, basically anti-union. A lot of industry moved into this area because of that. And low wages.

AP: Why was it anti-union and what was the situation with that? Now, a lot of things had to become unionized, so what was that like for Holland?

JS: Back then I don't think there was any union of any kind. The first union in this town, I would imagine, had been in about the late 30s, was a carpenters union. Elzenga and Valkers was maybe the one unionized contractor in town. At that time, everybody thought they were getting outlandish wages compared to the other people. Having been in management most of my life for a big corporation, I'm anti-union. But I also realize that unions come by poor management. If you have good management, you don't have unions. Dupont, who I know very well, their thousands of plants, none are unionized. In general the Dutch, and I know how people like to characterize people, but this community, your religion was very personal. You didn't go out and do evangelism. People who went out on the street were considered a little odd. Salvation Army, at that time, had a band and they'd be down town every night. Up until the war, everybody cruised 8th Street. Young guys would ride up and down 8th Street, the girls would walk, and the guys would drive. The Dutch, in general, are very independent type people. They don't like to be told what to do. The community, with that in mind, a lot of companies made a lot of money, basically by paying low wages. Holland still, I think, pays relatively low wages. Right now it's pretty good because you can't get any help. But back then, I remember people
saying, I got a quarter cent raise. Like they got the world for a quarter of a cent.

Inflation's done a lot to this. Young people laugh at a quarter cent raise. That was a big deal back then. But that's the way the companies were. There were maybe thirty, forty companies. But all the owners knew each other. They all knew what they were doing. Even though they won't admit to it, they had their own union of getting together and making sure that no one gave too many benefits. It wasn't until after the second World War that it became... Holland, I don't think, flourishes with unions now. There have been a few plants, like the General Electric Plant. Once a union has come into our area in the past, the company left, because it lost that individuality of that individual. Haworth, right now, is struggling. The union just decided not to. Their company's got to be on the ball if they're going to keep the union out of there now. They made a lot of promise, evidently, according to the paper, of what they would do if the union went in there. They better produce, because they'll be back. The day of company loyalty, there's all kinds of people, Holland Furnace, never worked another job. They wouldn't have gone anywhere else. They weren't great pay, but there was a lot of loyalty to who you work for. That's kind of gone. The company has no loyalty to their employees, either. I was vice president of operations for Chemitron, and seeing what they've done to people, I can understand that change. Holland is a completely different community today than it was. It was a uniquely close community. You could be any religion, as long as you didn't do things on Sunday. That was kind of the criteria. If you didn't try to wash your car on Sundays, if you didn't try to have your kids out here playing ball in
the street... We'd accept people. It's like the Padnos's. They're Jewish. I think they'd tell you that in those days, their dad was very well accepted. But he knew enough not to flaunt the fact that he was Jewish. Everybody knew it. They were closed on Sunday at that time. His dad just went with the flow of the community.

The Bagladi's were Catholic. The Catholics were a vast minority in this community at that time. We're really great to accept minorities, as long as there aren't too many of them. We still do that. We'll accept black people, as long as there aren't too many of them. We'll accept Spanish Americans, as long as there aren't too many of them. We claim we're very nice people, but in a way, we're only nice to ourselves.

AP: How do you think Holland is handling its growth spurt?

JS: I think lousy. I think our City Council is the worst council we've ever had. They're spending big money on the City Hall. Now they're talking about big money down in the swamp down there, what they call Windmill Island. They're spending big money on the library. We need a library, I'm not saying that. Being a builder and watching, and Ed Prince was exactly right, they should have moved that library, we talk, we have a lot of rhetoric about helping the homeless build affordable housing. I could reduce the price of every house built in Holland by $40,000 and give the same quality house that everybody else has if the city will just change some of their silly rules. I find the city in itself, the infrastructure, their interesting big projects no longer really serve the people. They're serving themselves to build monuments for themselves. That's the only reason I can determine why. Like the Area Center. Do we need an Area Center? Yes. I remember when the Civic Center was built and
everybody laughed, we’ll never fill that place, it’s way too big. I’m not one of these Myopic vision type persons. But, I think to be grandiose in vision, to say, we’re going to have an ice skating rink inside... I don’t think there’s a thousand people that could use an ice skating rink inside here on a regular basis. If there is, then private industry would take care of it and make money on it. It’s like, they’re going to build an indoor soccer field now. They’re not doing it to be nice to the city, and they’re not doing it to be magnanimous because they’re kids play soccer, because none of their kids play soccer, it’s a business proposition. I think the mayor in Holland, and the Council as it is constituted now, has really no feeling, outside of rhetoric, for the poor and those who are not "important people" in our eyes. You have to realize that I do a lot of work at the City Mission.

AP: What kind of things do you do at the City Mission?

JS: Well, I originally took a year off and remodeled the City Mission. I ran their emergency shelter for one year as a volunteer there. I primarily now act as an advisor to the director. I work with the men in the program there. But, we have so many people who are living in sub-standard housing in this town. We appoint one or two people and say we’re going to have this land lord inspection. Land lord inspection is the worst thing that happened to Holland. Most good land lords got out of it. I did. At one time, I had ten rental homes. I got rid of all of them. If I had a cracked window, just a little crack in the corner, they came in and made us repair, and it’d be cracked again. It doesn’t mean that you just leave it all cracked. If you’ve got to keep these houses up, you need more money. If the city really was
interested, I think they ought to put a Renaissance zone in from 13th to 17 Street or 18th Street, and people who rent their houses for a percentage below, would have their taxes cut by that amount. They say, we can’t do that by law. But we do it for industry, anytime industry wants to put up a building, we’re willing to give up--and it can be done. They just don’t want to do it.

AP: What kind of things need to be done to provide affordable housing?

JS: In the first place, Holland requires a 100 foot of frontage on the road for a lot. A lot in Holland right now would be $30,000 to $40,000. If we’d allow a person to build on a 50 foot wide lot, split that lot into two, you’d cut the price and you save $20,000. If you look at all the inner city of Holland, 12th Street, 15th Street, they’re all on 50 foot lots and the houses are 20 feet apart. Keep your side yards. And instead of building all the way across it, we built deeper on to the lawn.

AP: There’s a lot of room in those houses.

JS: Sure, it can be the same size, you don’t have any less footage, you just build deep into the lot. The city requires, even on sand, that you have to have a frost wall under a garage. It means you have to be down four feet in the ground, basically. That’s a $1,200 to $1,500 cost. 98% of all the garages built in the city more than thirty years ago don’t have a frost wall. They’re all standing. You don’t ever hear of a garage ever collapsing, and you don’t see cracked floors. Clay, it’s something else. But I’m talking in sand, which the majority of Holland is. You couldn’t do this up in Holland Heights where it is clay. The city has adopted the Boca Code. It’s the national electrical code for electricians, which says you have to have a plug within three feet
of a corner and no more than six foot of running wall without a plug. In the average bedroom, you’re going to end up with thirteen electrical outlets. You don’t need thirteen electrical outlets. Older homes, if they’re lucky, they have five. Any outlet will cost you, an electrician will tell, about $25. If you have a three bedroom or four bedroom home, which we need more of larger affordable homes, you could save $500 to $600 in electrical, and not deprive the person of anything. But that’s what the law is. It’s easier for them to say, well, that’s what the national building code is and to modify that law. I’ve talked till I’m blue in the face at City Hall with different people on this. In fact, I met with our former mayor, Neil Bergoff. I said to Neil, why don’t you say if people build a three bedroom home under $80,000, we’ll eliminate certain restrictions. It’s just a matter of doing it. You hear them, they say the builder’s got to make less money on the house. The average builder, on a home he builds, would be happy to make $5,000. The person who’s got to take less money is the city on taxes on these homes. Realtors get 7% if they sell a house. And banks. I think we should set up a pool of money that will help these people. The banks, as far as I’m concerned, are the biggest rip off in Michigan. In Holland here, you see very few bank contribute to anything, unless it’s got a lot of show. They’ll put on a golf outing for the used car dealers, but for the good of the community, you don’t see many banks being the spear head. Yet, they charge everybody the same percentage rate. They require a certain down payment. They say that’s what we’re governed by law. That’s right. I’m an old military guy, and I know how you get around the law. All they have to do is if the seven banking institutions would loan
one million dollars, interest free, to an organization, they’d have seven million dollars, so we’d have this little community group that’s going to fund money to those who otherwise can’t qualify. I think the things they’re doing downtown now to help these people paint their houses, they’re great. But why do you have to get a building permit to re-side your house? Why do you have to get a building permit to reroof your house? The only reason they do is so that they know in City Hall is to know that you’re spending money, so that, in the past, they could increase your taxes. They say, no that isn’t true. If a person puts aluminum siding on around their house and doesn’t do anything else, why can’t they just do it? If a person reroofs their roof, why can’t they just go ahead and do it. They say, well, it’s a hundred dollars here, it’s a hundred dollars there, that’s what makes a difference.

AP: What if they did just do it, resided their house without a permit?

JS: They’d get stopped. We have people riding around looking for that. You’d get fined. Anything over $600, you have to be a licensed builder. They’d go after your license. Again, the government is controlling. People don’t realize how many people are really hurting. Once you’re in the hole, it’s hard to get out of the hole. I just bought a piece of property for the City Mission. On 15th and Fairbanks, we’re going to build a women’s home for young mothers and children and for intact families. I’m going to head up a group to try and raise a million and a half dollars for that. But, I can guarantee you, we’re going to get all kinds of flack from the city before they allow us to build. I agree you can’t have separate rules for separate places. But it’s always interesting to me, and you have to realize, I’m a former manager, vice
president, of a corporation. Corporations, they can find ways around these things for corporations, but they can’t for the other person. What we basically have in City Hall right now, and we’re not here to bash City Hall, but in the past, I think the mayors, Lou Hallesy, Berghoff, in past, in general, have worked to make the community a better community for the community. Now I think what we’re looking at is developing Windmill Island. If that were a business, you’d cut that thing off, give it to somebody, and say, we’ve put enough money in that hole, let’s not stick anymore. If that’s a good deal, then why don’t they just give it away and let a developer have it. Say, why don’t you build it out and give us so much money back. The money we’re spending on remodelling that old City Hall, gutted out the whole inside. Being an ex-builder, you can’t remodel at the cost that you can build new when you’re dong what they’re doing. To me, it’s just building a show place. If the city really wanted a good City Hall, why don’t they take the office building up on the hill, it’s standing empty up there. It’s got more square footage in it than what they’re going to have in their new City Hall. I’m in the present and not in the past. The community has changed drastically. It still has a strong Christian ethic overseeing it, but it doesn’t have the influence it used to have. The churches have very little influence in this town. Meijer Thrifty Acres decided to open up on Sunday. Reformed, Christian Reformed Church preachers in particular, though I happened to go to those churches, all preached against it, how terrible it was. We lived on the north side, went by Thrifty Acres in the morning, that parking lot was almost half empty. The next week, they had triple stamp redemption. The parking lot was
overflowing, and everybody’s been doing it ever since. I don’t blame Thrifty Acres. But I think the church, in itself, has relented. Is it good? Some ways it is. Is it bad?

AP: You know why I don’t like to go there on Sundays? Because it’s the most crowded day.

JS: I personally don’t go to places like that on Sundays. I’m not a prude that I wouldn’t go out to eat on Sunday occasionally. But generally speaking, Sunday, I don’t golf. Is it wrong to golf? I don’t know if it is or not. For me, it would be wrong. I think it’s the Lord’s day. I don’t go fishing on Sunday, I don’t do a lot of things on Sunday. When we had a home on Lake Michigan, I didn’t let my children swim on Sunday. All our neighbors did, and they all went to the same church as we did. But I said, that’s a house rule. I told my three children, we’re out here, we have the use of this thing seven days a week. If you all want to tell me what day in the week you want to give it up, I’ll let you swim on Sunday. But I want one day set aside. I know the other argument is, what about the seventh day adventists. What about them? I guess that’s all I have to say. When we didn’t go to movies, we couldn’t blame somebody else because we didn’t go to movies, that was something we did, our choice. The town, I think, in the last ten years, has taken a real… And I can tie it to people. When this person came on as city manager, when this person came on as mayor… You have to understand, I have two daughters who are teachers, but part of the problem is, we have a teacher’s mentality at City Hall, and that’s not being very complimentary. They’re big in theory, but very short in practical. Naturally, I
exempt my two daughters from that. I was on the consistory for church where we had seven Christian school teacher. Worse consistory I ever served in. I was on the Reformed Bible College Board, and we had all kinds of businessmen on the board. We had too many. You still need the balance, and we’re losing that, I think. You look at City Hall and there are very few men on that council that run, what I call, a viable business.

AP: It seems like there have been some major businessmen who have done a lot for the city in the past.

JS: Originally, Holland Furnace was the big people. They built the Warm Friend down town and for Tulip Time they had their big Holland Furnace party and they brought in big name stars. We’ve had a lot of industry in this town that has absolutely done nothing for the town, fairly major ones. There are industries like Haworth, particularly Ed Prince. He went right out there. He didn’t have his name put on anything, but he was willing to speak up for the schools. People say, you’re a big Ed Prince fan. But I’m only an Ed Prince fan because I knew Ed from the day he went to Holland High and I went to Holland Christian. I also know the day Ed started the company. But Ed had enough common sense to bring in some good people to help him and run his operation. He didn’t try to run it himself. Jerry Haworth brought in this Bill Sikkel. He brought him in and let him run the show. Herman Miller very quietly was a big influence in Zeeland. The Depree’s, very quietly and underneath, still are big influences. They don’t try to use their money for personal influence, but just to do some good. If anybody would know how many millions of millions of
dollars Ed Prince spent downtown to try and just make a downtown, whether it was him or his wife that wanted that. But then they went and really kicked him in the teeth, and he went out and built out west. He’s not here anymore, but his wife isn’t here anymore, either. They bit the hand that was feeding them. The community itself is nothing like it was. I’m not saying it’s worse. We have diversity that we didn’t have then. Back in the 40s, we had one black family in town. He was a mechanic at what was then the Chevy garage, which is DeNooyer’s now. We accepted those people. Everybody talked to him and shook his hand, because we accepted them. They were a minority. We all accepted Padnos’s, because they were the only Jewish family. Only a couple Catholic families in business, and one was the Bagladi’s. I remember my dad getting criticized, and my dad was a builder, for having Bagladi’s doing his roofing. "Why are you having that Catholic doing that roofing for you?" We kind of did our thing with our people. For those that came into town, it was a tough town to move into. It was easy for those who went right to the Reformed or Christian Reformed or one of those churches. You’d have all kinds of friends immediately. In a way, it’s still true in Holland. Since then, we have the newcomers association, and they’ve developed their own little community sphere and influence.

AP: How do you think Holland is handling its diversification?

JS: Good and bad. I think the only good thing is we don’t have any groups really agitation against the diversity as groups very much. Bad in the fact that we basically tolerate them being here. I don’t think we go out of our way to help Spanish families
that are in distress, unless they come to our church, and I fault the church for that. We’re opportunists in that respect. Instead of just going out to say, we’re going to help you, because God created us all equal and Jesus said we have to help the poor and needy and that’s what we have to do. "If you come to our church or you do this..." I also know there’s a whole group for people, and they don’t have to be ethnically diverse for that, they kind of live on that type of thing, but we don’t have a whole lot of that in Holland. Those that come to the City Mission or Community Action House... I know at one time at the City Mission, the majority of people that were coming in for help were out of Fennville and the south area, al the way down to Battle Creek... (tape ends) ...those ethnically diverse groups will quietly push themselves along, and don’t get brazenly open, they’ll do really well. But if they brazenly jump out and make themselves agitative for what they want, then I think you’re going to see a real situation in Holland that will really be bad. Nobody’s more bull headed and more willing to get even then us good, Calvinistic, Christian Dutchmen. We’re almost like the Muslims, we do it for the Lord. But I’ve often thought they have to keep pushing, push here, push there. We aren’t just going to give them anything easy. Actually, no one gave us anything easy, either. My folks went back to the Netherlands in 1936, and I went with them. We were there for nine months, and when I came back to America, I couldn’t speak any English. I didn’t know English. I knew only Dutch. But after six months being there, I was a young kid, and I attended school with kids there, I was that uniquely different guy from America that was going to their school. But when I got back here, no one helped me
learn English. In general, when they're talking multi-lingual education, most Dutchmen don't buy it. No one helped us when we came here, no one gave us a class on how to speak English. You just were thrown in the pot, and you had to sink or swim. "If that was for me, than they can do it, too." But most people don't understand in education the importance of the family supporting the student. If kids don't get read to at home, if they sit and watch TV... I know in my own life, when our son, forty years ago, he was about six years old when we bought our first TV. To me, the worst thing that ever happened in our life was we bought an automatic dishwasher. People laugh about that. My wife and I always used to wash the dishes together. I'd wash, she'd dry. We'd stand for a half hour, forty-five minutes, and talk, like we never would otherwise have a chance to. Our kids, when they came out of school, we lived out by the lake, and I had to drive my children to school every morning, or my wife did, and we had to pick them up, because there wasn't any bus service back then. We knew more of what was going on in the school, because they walk out of the school and they're all excited. I pick up my grandkids at Rosepark Christian and they're, "Oh, you know what happened today, Grandpa?" My wife picks them up and brings them home, fifteen minutes later, it's nothing. My point being is that, it's so easy to put the kids out by the TV, and you go do something yourself. My daughter has a good program where the TV goes off at 8:00 and they have to read for one hour before they go to bed. I think that's a great program to make them read. But you've got to have strong parents. We had a lot of Spanish Americans at Chemitron that worked at our press floor. Hard, dirty, heavy work.
best employees we had for that kind of work. I observed most landscaping companies use them. One of the reasons they do is that a lot of them can’t speak English, but they’re willing to work. In general, young people today have lost that ability to work. I don’t blame them. I blame my generation who doesn’t force them to work. We tolerate a lot of things that years ago no one would ever tolerate. If a kid isn’t taught to work, he doesn’t learn it. I don’t think it’s an inborn nature to work. You have to be taught it. But Holland, if you weren’t here back in the 30s, early 40s, the town is just so different. There wasn’t any TV. There were basically two papers, the Dutch version and the Sentinel version. It wasn’t called the Sentinel, it was called the Holland News or something. The newspaper printed any person that got a speeding ticket, anything that happened in court. You’d open your paper at night, and you’d want to go to page four because that’s where they had all the arrests, parking tickets, anything. The big night was Friday night down town, cruise the town. All the farmers came in to town. Park on 8th Street and just kind of sit there, walk up and down 8th Street, go to the store. People only came to town once a week then. My folks had a guy who came around with a truck and took your order for groceries and deliver them the next day.

AP: You talked briefly about how the family unit and the role of women has changed. How has that changed?

JS: Well, the family unit has changed in the fact that when I was younger, about the worst thing a kid could do in this town was to run away from home, because everybody knew it, everybody talked to each other. We all knew each other. If a
person ran away from home, that was a real blot on a family. Or a young girl got pregnant. That was a real, real blot on a family. If a young girl left town, legitimately, for a while, everybody assumed that she must have been pregnant and went somewhere else to have the baby. The church, at that time, if you got pregnant, required you to stand up and confess your sins in front of the church. You used to have to stand up or you couldn’t be a member of the church. Did we have gang problems then? Yes. I belonged to what we called the north side gang. We were just a bunch of guys from the north side. We’d come in to town occasionally, go down to Kollen Park, and have a little rumble with the kids we called the city slickers. It’d be just a fist fight, then hop in your cars, and get out of town.

Entertainment at that time was primarily the drive-ins. Had’s was right across the street from Holland High School. The Snack Shop and Russ’ with a drive-in and a few other drive-ins. All the young girls kind of worked at drive-ins, so us young guys would just cruise and we knew where all the good looking girls were, and we’d try to impress them by leaving a nickel tip or something, as big spenders. The women’s thing, I don’t think anybody, unless you lived through it, can understand where the women’s issue came from. In the church, women were not allowed to speak in congregational meetings. They were allowed to teach Sunday School.

Women were very rarely, if ever, allowed to get up on the platform or pulpit to give an announcement. In the work area, women were, no matter what their qualifications were, were underpaid. You didn’t let them get to be a supervisor or anything. 1954 at Chemitron, I had a lady by the name of Karen Nyenhuis, she graduated from
Holland High. She was my secretary for 18 years. Any success I had with them was because of her. Karen got to be a supervisor in the last few years, but she could have been a plant manager, but it would have never happened back then. If it did happen, you figured something hanky panky had to be going on at night to get that high up in a company. The people that are upset about the women’s issue, and the upset is primarily in churches than anywhere else, is a thing that will go by like everything else has gone by in the churches. We’ve had a lot of issues in the churches over the years. Some people still want to hang on issues. Is there equal opportunity for women today? No. I don’t think there is. I think if the women’s movement was not quite so militant, the women would get a lot further a head than what they are. If a woman has a fairly good job, you say, well, they ought to have some need in the company to fill their requirement for a minority. I don’t consider a woman a minority. I guess, unconsciously, we did discriminate against women. We thought a good woman could be a secretary. We didn’t call them administrative assistants or any of these titles. Had we thought of it at that time, I think we would have. Instead of giving them another pay raise, we could have said, hey, you’re doing a good job, we’re going to call you are administrative assistant. For equal pay, equal work, I don’t think it happens. I think it’s going to be a long time coming. I know a lot of guys are upset when they see a woman on a construction crew. She can’t do exactly what they do. They may only do it once in their lifetime, life this or lift that, but that gal can’t do it, and that’s what they talk about. If it slides in, it’s one thing. If it’s forced in, I think it’s another problem. That’s part of the problem with minorities in
Holland. No one, right now, is speaking out or agitating for the African Americans. No body’s really out looking for them. We get a lot of them at the City Mission now because they here there’s good employment opportunities in Holland. They have a tough time getting a good job. It’s pretty hard to be black in Holland and get a good job.

AP: Would you say it’s harder than being Hispanic or Asian American?

JS: Well, Asian Americans usually have a reputation in most places of being very good, reliable workers. They also have a reputation in Holland that if they run a restaurant, you don’t want to go there very often because it won’t be very clean. Hispanics in general, if they speak English well and they groom according to our standards, white standards, I think, have no problems. Blacks, in general, they stand out a little too much. They have the advantage that big companies will hire one or two of them for their token integration of the pay roll. But I find, very definitely, black guys have an easy job at getting entry level, but anything further than that... We discriminate horribly against black people: you have to be twice as sharp as a white guy and you better not have too long kinky hair. I have no question that they’re discriminated against. Entry jobs, they can get a dime a dozen. Everybody wants to have a couple of them around. It’s almost like an ornament, but don’t let them get too far. I don’t think you find too many people besides someone like Prince, who really promote people on their merit. I really think there are a couple of companies, like Prince, that are color blind. I know they had a black pilot for a while. We do discriminate. We’re really great to accept them if they conform to what we do, if they don’t have
the Afro-American speech and they clean up. I teach guys that at the City Mission. I tell them you want to go out and get a job here in this town, don’t where a black shirt, don’t where black pants. You’re black enough the way it is. Black, in industry, is synonymous with gangs or motorcycles or that kind of deal. Whether they like it or not, there’s still an older generation that’s controlling these businesses, and I personally think it’s going to be tougher for them as time goes on. We integrated with them fairly well. But, young people today, I hear them say things about blacks that I would never. Twenty or thirty years ago in Holland, you’d never see a black and a white girl together. There weren’t too many blacks, either. But you’d never see a black and white girl together. People today, I was just up at Camp Grayling, I must have seen a hundred blacks with white girls up there. There are people who don’t like it and aren’t going to buy it, and they’re holding it against that black person. The problem is, if we hire a bad hire, we say, "Well, kids don’t operate that way, we’ll hire another one." But if they’re black, we say, "We hired this black guy, he wasn’t worth a darn. Now all blacks are that way." But very definitely, they have it tough.

AP: It seems people always find something to discriminate about. They even do studies about how attractive somebody looks compared to somebody unattractive, or underweight and overweight.

JS: We discriminate against white people, too. That’s called white hillbillies. I thought about that in the paper the other day. They had this parade down town and it said that Freestone and his wife had come dressed as a couple of Hillbillies. If they had
come and done what they did as black or Spanish American, everybody would have been writing into that paper saying, how terrible! But because the hillbilly is white, and we say, you’re from Arkansas or Alabama, you’re a hillbilly.

AP: There’s also a whole class in Holland of white people who are struggling for jobs, and they are completely forgotten.

JS: Sure. We, in general, Calvinistic Dutch people, do not like to spend a lot of time helping people. We like to give them a handout. We say, here’s fifty bucks, buddy, take care of yourself, help yourself. It’s changing. I know Faith Christian Reformed Church has a group that’s working with a bunch of families and a lot of churches are doing that now. City Mission has, in the winter, about a hundred people there every night. In the summer, there’s maybe forty or fifty. But the biggest thing these people need are mentors. Even young girls... How old are you, if I may ask?

AP: Twenty-one.

JS: OK. We have a lot of girls who are about your age with two or three kids. Dad and mom told them not to marry the bum, and she did. Now the bum took off. Everything they had was from Rent-to-Own. They had an apartment that they rented and hadn’t paid the rent for six months. Quickly, she’s had three children, or there’s one she’s carrying, one’s one year, and the other one’s two years old, and she has nowhere to go. Dad and mom are playing tough love, and there’s a time for that. So, off to the mission. These young girls are dying for love. Not carnal love. But they’re dying to talk to somebody who’ll understand and listen and not say, I told you so. But we have a tough time getting people to come in there and do that. I teach
some Bible classes at Rest Haven down town. I’ve invited those people a hundred
times. "You’re all retired, looking for something to do? Why don’t you go to the
Mission and just sit there for an hour and talk to one of these young girls." You’ve
never met a young person, and I challenge anybody with this, who has anything bad
to say about their grandparents. But you’ll meet a lot of young persons who don’t
have much good to say about their parents. In my own private study, I find that the
majority of the people we end up with in the City Mission don’t have living
grandparents. Kids go to grandparents, and grandparents sit and talk with them and
say, You’re wrong, you can’t do this or that. She’ll take it from the grandparents.
Where as mother and dad, she’s mad at them. It’s the same way. I know
grandparents here. We just need to somehow develop groups that will help people
over the long run. Some of them you can’t help. But that’s not our responsibility.
We just have to try. If they don’t do what the Bible teaches them to do, they’re not
responsible for us or them. I think it’s going to be a major thing at Holland. I was
at the Mission yesterday, and half the guys at the emergency shelter are black. Why
are they there? Number one, the City Mission requires you to take a shower
everyday, which keeps a lot of people out of this town. A lot of guys don’t like that
idea of having to take a shower everyday. The City Mission says you can only stay
there five days, and you have to have a job, or you can’t stay there anymore. The
Mission’s the cleanest mission you’ll ever see. It’s got very good food, but they have
very tough rules. Most of these guys are in trouble anyway because that’s what they
didn’t want to do, listen to rules. I can pick them way back in grade school already,
when they started giving teachers a bad time. Those are the same guys that end up someday in a mission. They just fight rules all the way through life. I think we’re going to have a real problem in Holland with the minorities, which we haven’t really had yet. We’re getting a little bit of that with the black gangs and the Haitians. They see each other stealing from each other. The blacks don’t like them because they get preferential hiring. And they do. You run a plant and you’ve got a guy from Cambodia or something, they’ll hire him because they know he’s going to be there everyday just as sure as the sun rises, and he isn’t going to miss. We have this perception in industry that if you get Vietemese or Cambodians, they’re loyal, they stay right there, and they work. In general, that’s true. They have a perception of blacks that says, they work when they want, they aren’t working half the time. The guys we get in here, are not the cream of the crop. It’s like taking all the white guys in Holland here called shiftless, lazy, unambitious, and putting the big cross on their forehead and sending them to Grand Haven for a job. Soon as people see, there’s a cross on the forehead, we don’t want those people. That’s a problem we didn’t have. You either blended in with us, or you didn’t back then. A lot of people came to Holland and left because they didn’t like Holland. They came in, they didn’t belong to a church, they didn’t attend a church, they went outdoors and washed their car on Sunday. Their neighbors came over and said, "Hey, we don’t do that here in Holland on Sunday." "Who are you to tell me?" Well, we were shunning them. They got isolated, and they’d pack up and leave. Good? No. Bad? Some advantages to it. In general, not good.
AP: Kind of as a capstone question, are there one or two things you can think of that you’re most thankful for in your life here?

JS: I guess the number one thing that I’m thankful for is the close knit community we were. I never learned to dance. I never went to a movie, until I went to college, I never played cards. When I went into the service, the place to find girls was at a dance hall. I was there with two left feet. You really didn’t go there to find girls to dance with, you know, you went for other reasons. I guess in it’s only little way, the city, or God, protected me from myself with that. I have to be most thankful of the fact that I had a wonderful Christian upbringing in a Christian community. Even though some of the little crazy things we did back then like walking on the west side of River Avenue. Some people don’t want to believe that, but it was true. You just did not walk across that street. If you did, you’d more than likely get beat up. You didn’t take the chances for it. I think Holland has been, and in some ways still is, a very unique community. Basically, people here are honest. It’s one of the few places that you can walk into a place and say, "Charge it. My name is John Schutten," and they won’t ask you for an ID. I’ve travelled for the corporation all over, and most other places, you can’t even cash a check at a bank without two picture ID’s. You go out to California, you make a deposit, you can’t draw your money out for two weeks. Here you go into the bank and you can draw it out the next day. We have a lot of unique things here, quality of life that some people think are kind of peculiar. Have we lost a lot of that? Yes. Is that good? Yes. Is it bad? Yes. We lived in Holland all my life. I never had a key to a front door until I moved in here. We had a home
on the lake, and we left it open all winter, never locked it. When we sold it, people couldn’t believe we didn’t have a key to the front door. We don’t remember ever having a key. We just left the doors always unlocked. We went to bed at night with unlocked doors. We left it all winter and went to our home in Holland, and left it unlocked. You don’t do that quite as much anymore. Historically, I think the influence of the community was very strongly controlled by the Calvinistic world and life view, which is pretty narrow. We tolerated the Catholics. We thought they were a kind of peculiar group over there on 13th Street. We had a couple little Baptist Churches at that time. We had the Assembly of God Church that’s on 26th Street now. A couple little groups like that. But in general, 98% were Reformed. We had no Presbyterian. We had the Methodist Church down town on 10th Street. We didn’t even know who they were. But there were very few others in the whole community. There’s been a big change in that. It was very close. You were either in or out in those days. I’m just thankful to live in a place like Holland, Michigan in the United States of America. I was in Iraq and Turkey in 1990, and I see what these people live under and what they live on. I tell you, you just can’t help but say, "Thank the Lord," for every day that you live in this country. These people that complain about our government, and I think it’s a terrible government we have, but it’s better than anybody else has. These people complain, like myself, about our city management. It’s terrible. But then if I’d get off my duff and run for that office and do it myself, then I could run it my way. But we don’t do it. We haven’t had that now. We don’t have any good, strong business people. I know some really good
non-business people, too. Van Wylen, who was at Hope College. Great. He maybe
makes more sense in some of these things than all the other people put together. So I
don’t just mean businessmen. We’ve just got to get some people back in who are
doing it for the community and the not for themselves. If I did it, I’d run for my
own agenda, and that’s the wrong way to run. I think that’s what we have here right
now. I think the museum, these historical things, they’re great. I think spending a
million bucks to fix the Cappon House, I’d rather bulldoze it down than spend a
million bucks on it. I could put a lot of poor distressed people in a million dollars
worth of housing around this community that desperately need it. If you want to see
an old houses, you can go up to Muskegon. If you look at the sorted life Cappon
had, why they want to even use his name… But that’s besides the point. It’s good
there are people that have that interest. My wife belongs to the Questers, is a
national chairman of the Quester which collect antiques. Being a builder, I think
every house that’s over fifty years old ought to be bulldozed down and new ones
built. No, I’m just kidding. I’m a critic of what we do for the less fortunate. I
wasn’t always that way. The Lord took my health away ten years ago. And I spent
basically three to five years in hospitals or in bed. I had a lot of time to look at what
the Lord gave me and didn’t give somebody else and why. Up until then, I thought I
was pretty good. For years I was president of the United Fund in Holland, and I was
president of the Young Calvinists League, and I was an officer in Rotary, and I… I
could go in with all the I’s. That’s what you have to think about. But you still have
a little trouble with that occasionally. Right now, I’m going to quit the job I’m on
and spend the next two years trying to get that home built for the City Mission. It’s so important because it’s the right location, it’s across from Fairbanks Park where the kids can play. It’s out in the east end of town where all the employment agencies are. People can walk over and get their own groceries over there instead of us. We have to teach some of these girls how to cook. We preach the intact family, we want these girls to go out and get a job, yet they have nowhere to keep their kids. So we’re going to build a day care center there. I think it’s a step in the right direction.

We don’t take any government money at the City Mission. We don’t take any United Fund money or anything to keep it that we can proclaim Jesus Christ, and I believe in that. But I also think that we’ve just got to handle, somehow, in a very organized manner… people are falling through the cracks. And we’re getting more of them. I sound like a flag waver, I guess. I’m really not. But I think we’ve made a situation very complicated that has very simple answers to it. People say, if the answers are so simple, why don’t we do them? The natural answer to that is, because we never did it that way before. That’s our answer in a lot of the community. The church says, we never did it that way. I think there’s an awakening of that. Overall, I’ve seen a lot of progress. We’re more tolerant. But only if they’re our kind.

AP: Are there any other things that we haven’t touched on that you’d like to talk about?

JS: I can think of a world of things to talk about, but I don’t think they’re germane to what you’re trying to find out about. I think progress, if that’s what they want to call it… I was telling my wife that the other day. Somebody wrapped us on the back end of our car. She said, "All these cars in Holland." I said, "Yeah, it’s too bad we
aren't back to the horse and buggy days, we wouldn't have this problem." Every progress brings a problem. When the horses went down the street, you had the manure to pick up. Now, we have cars and we have other things to do. Sure, they're wonderful, but there are drawbacks to them. The TV's wonderful, it has a drawback. We just have it too good in America. We're just very spoiled. I don't want to sound like I'm saying we shouldn't have nice things, because as you can see, we have pretty nice things ourselves. I don't see anything wrong with it. I also feel that somehow, someway, somewhere in Holland, we have to get an influential group to address the problem. Not a committee. When I ran a plant over here in Holland, whenever guys came up to me with ideas that I didn't like, I said, let's form a committee to study. Nothing ever happened. I didn't have to say no that way. Right now that's what we're doing: let's bring in an outside consultant. So we bring him in. I've done that. Who's he going to work for, the guy's who paying the bill? They no better than to go against the guy who's paying the bills. That's one of the big things I see happening in Holland. They bring in these outside consultants to tell us about our town. They don't even know who we are or what we ar. We're different. We're a unique place. We put basements in all our houses. What do we do with our basements? It's an $8,000 luxury that we put down there to put a bunch of junk down there. Half the world doesn't have basements. Even in America. You go down south, they all put them on slabs. Why don't we put them on slabs? You put a house on a slab here, you can't sell it. A consultant doesn't understand that uniqueness about Holland, Michigan. I watched NUGM come in for the City
Mission. This is the only Mission in American that does not receive some type of money from United Fund, City, Government, or something else. It’s solely supported by individuals and/or companies in this town. It’s a unique situation. You couldn’t do this in any other town. There’s been all kinds of people who’ve been in here to study from other missions. How do you do this? How do you get 400 volunteers--my wife’s head of the volunteers at Holland Hospital--to work at the hospital and do their job as well as they do? There are volunteers in other communities, but our percentages are way up. That’s still a great thing about Holland. We do a lot of that. I’m not saying we’re really bad because we have to take care of these poor. But I think there’s a real way we could take care of it. If we could get the right people in the right place. Don’t ask me who those people are. That’s about it, I guess.

AP: Thank you very much.