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TerHaar, Clayton Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Clayton Ter Haar
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Interviewer: Ann Paeth

AP: Can you just state your name and date of birth, if you will, and where you were born?

CT: Clayton Ter Haar. Date of birth is [date removed], 1930, and I was born in Holland Hospital and lived in the city of Holland, or the outskirts, all my life.

AP: Your family is from Holland? They’ve been in Holland for quite some time?

CT: Yes, my grandparents came over from the Netherlands. My parents started out as farmers and they lived in the outskirts of Holland. My father went into the automobile business from the late 1920’s until early in World War II. Then he bought a men’s clothing store on 8th Street, which he owned and operated until about 1970.

AP: Do you have children and are they still in the area?

CT: No. Well, one of the children, our son, Richard, lives in Grand Rapids and he’s a golf pro at Byron Center at the Railside Golf Club. The other son is a golf pro and he’s in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

AP: Since you’ve lived in Holland all your life, let’s concentrate on some changes that have occurred in Holland over the past 50 or so years. What, to you, are the biggest changes that happened in Holland since you were a boy?

CT: I would say the growth of the city. I think when I was a small boy our population here was around three or four thousand, and we didn’t have anywhere near the industry that we have now. It was somewhat of a farming community. I can remember the wagons lining up with sugar beets at the sugar beet factory, which is
right near the Heinz plant. I would say the city has become a lot less conservative. when I was small, virtually nothing was open on Sunday. You had to look pretty hard to find a gas station or a drug store. They were just not open. Virtually everything in the city was closed on Sunday. I think probably a lot bigger percentage of the population went to church on Sunday. It was pretty well a forgone conclusion that it was Sunday church, and Sunday afternoon you didn’t do anything. My dad would not allow ball playing and things like that. Then Sunday night, we went back to church.

AP: What is a Sunday for you like now?

CT: Well, we go to church on Sunday morning, but usually do not go at night. We have various forms of recreation. We have a swimming pool in the backyard. When I was young we would virtually never go to a store on Sunday, and now we shop. We may go and pick up things at the grocery store on Sunday afternoon, particularly for dinner on Sunday night. So what do you think, Ruth, is that about it?

RT: Just, getting together with the family occasionally.

CT: Yeah, it’s still a family day, which it was back when I was a kid, we were kids.

AP: Where did you go to school?

CT: The first two years I went to school at a school called Van Raalte School, which was two room country school, and it was located right across the street from the Reimold farm on 16th Street and Country Club Road. At that time, I think 16th Street was paved, but Country Club Road was gravel. Like I say, it was a two room school. The kindergarten through the fourth grade was in one room, and the fifth grade
through the eight grade was in what we called the big room. They had one teacher for each room. The teacher for the big room was the principal. I spent the kindergarten and first grade there. My dad operated a business on Columbia and 8th Street. Lincoln School, a city school, was only three blocks away on 11th and Columbia. We paid a small tuition, and in the second grade, I started at Lincoln School, which is on 11th and Columbia.

AP: High School. Was there just public high school, or was Holland Christian there? Was that where you went, or did you go to...

CT: Holland Christian has been in existence for a long time. No. I went to Holland High. There was a school called East Junior High. That was kind of unusual. You went through sixth grade at a grade school. Then all the children in Holland went to the seventh grade, wherever they lived, at East Junior High. It was only one grade, seventh grade. Then, the eighth grade we started in junior high school, which was on the corner of 15th and River. You went eighth, ninth, and tenth to junior high, and the eleventh and twelfth to senior high. Maybe it was tenth, eleventh, and twelfth to senior high.

AP: What did you do after high school?

CT: I went to Hope College, and then I went to Davenport College in Grand Rapids. From there, I was an automobile salesman and I worked at Vandenberg Chrysler Plymouth, and, later, in 1952, they changed to Buick. I, basically was with Vandenburg. In 1958, I bought a share of the company and eventually became a full partner in the company. I worked at Vandenberg Buick until 1985, and we sold the
company in 1985. Then I actually continued to work there for a few more years until I retired.

AP: Let’s talk a bit about the colleges in the area and how they’ve changed. You said you went to Hope and Davenport, which are two in this area, and Davenport, I think, now Davenport has a branch in Holland. When was that in existence. Did you go to the school in Grand Rapids?

CT: I went to Grand Rapids.

AP: How have those schools changed?

CT: It’s changed. Davenport has become quite a large college. I believe they have roughly twelve branches in Michigan and Indiana.

AP: What do they offer?

CT: Davenport is primarily a business college.

AP: And that’s what you did there?

CT: Yes. I’m sure they probably offer a lot more courses now.

AP: Hope, too. How long did you go to Hope?

CT: I went to Hope for one semester. Hope has grown immensely. I think when I went to Hope there were around 1,100 students and I think they’re on 3,000 now, so they’re about triple in size.

AP: Why did you switch?

CT: I just was kind of eager to start earning some money. That was the primary reason.

AP: We talked a little bit about big changes in Holland about going to church. Let’s talk about what role the church plays in Holland and the community, and how that has
CT: Most every church was a one minister church. It was quite unusual for a church to have a second associate minister. The church basically had three employees. They had the minister and the choir director, which was strictly a part paid job, and it might have been strictly volunteer, and the other job was the custodian, who kept the church clean. That was pretty well what every church was. I think most churches at that time, if they had 400 members, they were considered a large church. Where as now, you have churches in Holland with three and 4,000 members and with a staff of maybe ten to fifteen people.

AP: What do you think is beneficial from that and what do you think is a negative drawback?

CT: I think it's mostly all positive. The church has a large staff so they can have an educational minister and a minister of music and an executive minister, so to speak, and a minister that handles a lot of the business functions of the church. And secretaries. Let's face it, churches have gone to audio visual instruction, and it's become a lot more specialized. I think it's basically all good. I think it has had an effect on the very small churches. We've seen some small churches, including the one I used to go to, Sixth Reformed Church on Lincoln Ave. and 12th Street, and that church disbanded about a year ago. Bethel Reformed was a small church on Van Raalte Avenue, and they've done the same thing. They've merged with other churches, basically. But I think this will make the smaller churches that merge better churches for it.
AP: Has the style of worship changed?

CT: Yes. I think choirs have become much better. With the sound equipment that is available now, it's made the services more understandable for everybody. I believe the services basically have shortened up a little bit. When I was kid, the services usually went for about an hour and fifteen to an hour and twenty minutes. Now, I think, it's pretty well accepted that one hour is about it.

AP: Holland last year received the honor of being named one of the top ten All American cities. What qualities do you think earn Holland this honor? What things are unique about Holland that would give it that title?

CT: The All American City, they have prerequisites that you have to attain. You have to have a good city government and I think part of it is how much employment you have verses how much unemployment, the infrastructure of the city, how good is your library, city hall, and police department, fire department, those things. That's one of the things I did. I was on City Council for twelve years, and I represented this Fifth Ward, which is basically Holland South Side, for twelve years. But, they became an All American City after I left.

AP: What did you do in that position? What did that consist of?

CT: Councilman? You basically represent your ward. We live in the Fifth Ward, you have to live in the ward you represent, and Fifth Ward was basically everything south of 32nd street. The City Council is basically the board of directors of the city. Basically, they give each council person a department of the city to represent, and I was the representative for eight years for the Holland Board of Public Works. One
year I was a representative with the Police Department and another year I was a representative with the library. But most my years, I was the representative with the Board of Public Works. I was one of the many councilmen that were strongly in favor of Holland getting an airport. We really have never had an airport. Ed Prince from Prince Corporation, he improved the airport that we had by doing a lot of the things at his own expense. But Holland basically did not have an airport until about the early eighties.

AP: How did that come to be?

CT: He finally felt that he had too big an investment in the airport, and it was really not his job to furnish the city with an airport, and that the city of Holland should acquire the airport. So, he let it be known that he’d sell that airport to the city for a fair price, and if it wasn’t sold within, I believe a year, if the city didn’t do something about it, he was going to close it. I can understand it, because he had a huge investment that he wasn’t getting any return whatsoever on, or almost no return. Strictly business wise, it was a loser for him. The city would wind up acquiring the airport. We have now one of the few airports that is operating with no budget. The city does not contribute anything to the operation of the airport. The airport is operated strictly by an airport advisory committee that’s made up of people from the area. Not just the city but the entire area. It operates strictly on fees that the landings and the take-offs and the repair of airplanes and so on... What that generates, that’s what pays the bills for the airport. It operates. This is something that’s coming up. A lot of people feel that it should be, and I agree, that the airport
should be operated by an authority, like the hospital is. The hospital is operated by
an authority, basically Holland and the surrounding townships. The airport, I think,
should be operated on the same basis. Of course, they have the Park Township
Airport and it seems to be, at least in my opinion, a rather unsafe situation. The
trees are getting higher and the airport is just in a pocket of woods and there’s been
fatalities out there and the airplanes are getting a little bigger and a little faster and it
makes it tougher to land them on a 2,000 foot runway, where the Tulip City airport
has a 5,000 foot runway with much better approaches and much better equipment. I
forget the terminology now, but they have much better equipment to bring the planes
in in bad weather with very little visibility.

AP: I think people don’t often think about the actual airport. They think about the planes,
and the make of the planes in safety. But they don’t think about the layout of the
airport, which is obviously just as important.

CT: Oh sure, that’s right. You mentioned the changes. Probably one of the changes that
I’ve seen is that when I was a young boy, we had a cistern that would drain the sink
and the laundry water, and the water would go into the cistern, which was a large
tank made out of bricks and blocks, and it’d seep into the ground from there. We
had an outhouse for our other needs. Then, septic tanks came along. I think we got
inside plumbing when I was about five or six years old. A lot of the homes in our
area, they operated on cisterns and septic tanks, and the septic tank was a fairly
recent thing when I was a small boy. Particularly in the wintertime, that was a big
improvement.
AP: You talked a bit about being on City Council. What other organizations and activities have you been involved in.

CT: I’ve been a Rotarian for about 30 years. I’ve been involved in a lot of functions. I was involved, going way back into HEDCOR, Holland Economic Development Corporation. A lot of people bought stock that they realize the stock was basically an investment in the city, and it was spent to buy land, and then that land was eventually sold, and then they used that money to buy more land. That’s how Holland got a very, very large industrial base, got a big jump on an awful lot of other cities around. That’s what made Holland grow. I was involved in the Holland Chamber of Commerce, of which HEDCOR was a spin-off. I was also a member of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the JC’s, and I was a member of the Optimist’s Club for quite a few years.

AP: What do those organizations do?

CT: The Optimist’s Club is made up of people who’ve got a good outlook on life, an optimistic outlook on life. A lot of the things they do are for the youth. The JC’s are very civic minded, they promote all sorts of civic activities. I’ve always been fairly involved in our churches. I was on the pastoral search committees, several times, of various churches, to get new ministers when the original ministers left. With that and the Chamber of Commerce and the City Council, that’s been pretty much my civic interests, so to speak.

AP: Ter Haar is a Dutch name. How do you see the Dutch heritage interacting with Holland?
CT: I've always appreciated the Dutch because they're frugal and they're always interested in getting a lot of bang for the buck, so to speak. They have a good work ethic, they want to do their job, whether it's working or playing, they want to do a good job. One of the attributes of the Dutch are cleanliness. The Dutch basically do a good job of maintaining their property and the other things they purchase, like their automobile and furniture, what have you. They're people that believe in taking care of things and doing things the way they ought to be done.

AP: How has Holland's diversity changed with the growth of the city.

CT: I'm sure the Dutch are a smaller percentage. The city was founded by church congregations coming over here. The entire church would move from the Netherlands to Holland. Of course, you not only have Holland, but you have Zeeland and you have Borculo and Overisel; all the smaller, little towns. Now the percentage of Dutch is smaller. Other people have moved in, I think because they liked what they saw. I think today that's still true. I'm amazed at the number of people that I knew when I was younger, I knew them in high school and college, and an awful lot of those people moved away, and now I'm amazed at how many are moving back, and there's got to be a reason for that, but they do, a lot of them are moving back.

AP: What do you think the reason is for that?

CT: I think they like Holland. I can name you people who sometimes kiddingly said, that were with national organizations, "Well, I hope I don't get transferred to Holland." They looked at Holland, even though maybe a lot of them had never been here, as kind of a one-horse, hick-town. One of the people I'm thinking of, he was
transferred in here to run the Gamble store. I don't even think that company exists anymore. He came in here to operate the Gamble store, which was on 8th Street. After about eight or ten years, they were going to transfer him out, and he refused the transfer, and they said, "Well, it's either take the transfer or you're out of the company," and he said, "I guess I quit then." I can also think of three Sears managers that the very same thing happened to. They came into Holland with Sears, they were the managers of the store, and when they were told they were transferring out, they elected to stay and give up their positions with Sears. I've heard of that happening with other companies, too. General Electric used to be a large company in Holland, and they have since closed their plant. A lot of the people that were with G.E. and transferred out, they came back to Holland when they retired. They weren't from Holland, but they spent part of their business life in Holland, so to speak, then transferred out, and when they retired, they came back to Holland, they didn't go back to where they were born. I think there's got to be something to be said for that. However, I think the climate in Holland can be a little tough to take now and then.

AP: Right. I was going to ask you if you thought there were any negative aspects.

CT: Yeah, and I would say one of them is the climate. Of course, you can move out of this climate in the wintertime, and that's what a lot of people do.

AP: Are there any others?

CT: Can you think of any negative things? Ruth is from Grand Rapids. But she's known people in Holland and she's lived here for 47 years. Maybe she ought to answer that
question.

RT: I can't think of any negatives. I could when I first moved here.

AP: What did you think was negative?

RT: That fact that it was so small and everybody knew everybody, and everybody knew everybody else's business. If they didn't know, they made it their business to know. That was a hard thing to get used to.

AP: And that probably wouldn't seem to be the case anymore, with the size.

RT: Not at all.

CT: I think a smaller town, that can be the situation. It's just a smaller town and you tend to know what everybody's doing and what everybody's thinking.

AP: Do you think Holland has maintained all of those qualities that typify Holland, even throughout it's tremendous growth?

CT: No, I think there's more crime. We used to not think anything of leaving the house unlocked when we'd go some place. We didn't even lock it at night. I can remember one time leaving for Florida on vacation. After we were down the road a 100 miles, I realized I hadn't locked the door. And I said, well, if I really want it locked, I'd call on the neighbors, but I thought for a week or ten days it'd be OK. So I never bothered to call. At one house, we built the house, we had a garage door. I forgot if it was the outside lock or the lock between the garage and the house. At any rate, we sold the house, but the key for the lock had gotten covered with the fiber board that they lined the inside of the garage with, and the key was behind it. We never bothered to do anything about it. When the people that bought the house said,
"How about the key to the garage door?" I said, "I'll tell you where it is, it's right behind that wall board, and it's been there for about twenty years." I never had the key for the lock. What city are you from?

AP: I'm from Bay City, across the state.

CT: One of the things that the mayor and council do is that we have a mayor/council exchange, and we basically trade. We go to one city... No, but that wasn't Bay City, was it? That was Port Huron. I was going to say we had a mayor/council exchange with Bay City but it was never Bay City, but Port Huron and Midland.

AP: Midland's right near by. The cities just run in together.

CT: Well...

AP: How has the role of women changed in Holland?

CT: When I was born and raised, very few women worked outside of the home. Most women were housewives and they raised the kids and they kept the house clean and they stayed home basically. Now, it's probably more women work than don't work, work outside the home. And, of course, more women are involved... I don't think there were any women on the city council, that I can remember, until the principal of the Junior High School ran and was elected to council. Bernice Bishop. She was on the council. That, I believe, was the first woman, and that was in about the late 40s or early 50s. But, it was pretty well unheard of to have a woman in government. And, like I say, it was very unusual to have women working in manufacturing plants. Pretty much, if they did work in an office, it was strictly office work, that's what they did. They did not work in the factory. The whole economy seems to be geared
now to women working. That’s one of the reason why people can afford a lot of the things they couldn’t afford before, it’s because of the woman’s paycheck. It’s probably the cause of a lot of the problems we have because the mother isn’t home when the kids come home from school, and that, I think, is a very, very big problem. And mothers, when they do get home, the wash still has to be done, and the ironing, and this and that. So they don’t have time to spend with the children, like they used to have.

AP: How could you see that being eliminated?

CT: Oh, boy, that’s going to be a tough thing. Most people today, they are so materialistic. They want the latest car and they want the big house and they want the big color TV’s and the boats and all the various things that a lot of them could not do it if it wasn’t for the wife’s paycheck.

AP: Have there been any controversies in Holland?

CT: One of them, that it hasn’t been too long ago, was the airport. Some people felt we should have an airport, that it was good for overall community business, that it would bring jobs to the community. Some people thought it was frivolous and it was only for the wealthy, and that’s the only people that benefitted from an airport. I guess the one controversy I can remember is the annexation. At one point, the schools were becoming inadequate. There were too many kids, and not enough schools. At that time, the city accepted kids from basically Holland and all of the surrounding area. The schools were supported by the state, as far as the operation of them. But the building of the schools was up to the city of Holland. The same thing was happening
in other communities, too. Finally, the city and the city school board and the city council, basically the representatives of the people of the city, finally said by, I think they gave them three or four years, if the outlying areas have not politically annexed to the city of Holland by such and such a date, the city would no longer accept their children. There was a vote in many of the townships and school districts, and many of them came in to the city, and many of them did not. The entire West Ottawa school system, there was never a West Ottawa school system, and that West Ottawa school system evolved from the fact that they said, "We’re not going to annex to the city and we’re going to build our own school system." So they did. There were other areas. There’s still a district that’s virtually surrounded by the city of Holland, called the Federal District. That’s from Waverly Road to Fairbanks Avenue, from 8th Street to the river. That whole area decided not to annex. They went to West Ottawa Schools. They still do. There are some kids that... Our south border of the school district is really goofed up. There’s a lot of kids that live virtually across the street from schools in Holland that go to school in Hamilton.

I can remember not too long ago there was a bank robbery at the bank on the corner of Waverly Road and 8th Street, but it was in the Federal District. The Holland police got there and they virtually said, "Hey, you’re out of our jurisdiction." But we will wait here to assist until the Ottawa county Sheriff’s department arrives. The Ottawa County Sheriff’s department was the policing department that would handle that area.

AP: And they’re further away from it than Holland?
CT: Oh sure. Usually. I think they have an office someplace in the West Ottawa area now. But, basically, the Ottawa County Sheriff's department, I think, is located in West Olive, which is ten miles. The Holland Police Department were there in a matter of a couple of minutes. But they're [the federal district] simply out of they're jurisdiction. I don't think it made much difference, frankly. But, that happens, and I'm sure it has happened more, because as far as fires, they're out of the Holland Police Department Area.

AP: What were the problems and concerns of the average citizen or your average problems and concerns maybe you first started working, verses what they are now.

CT: I guess one of the things I'm more concerned about now is the racial differences in the city. We've got a large Spanish element, and, I think, it's about one sixth of the community. And that's going to change. That's going to go up. There will be a time when the Spanish are the primary inhabitants of the city of Holland, the whole country. With that, we have gotten a bunch of Orientals and blacks. Apparently, they don't seem to know how to get along very well. You've had the gang problems. I don't know That's seems like that's simmered down a little bit.

RT: We've been away for four months, so we're out of touch.

AP: Have you witnessed any problems or violence as a result of gangs.

CT: Yes, I did. I just happened to see two cars. They were going down the street in opposite directions, and they stopped, and backed up, and the kids got out of the two cars and got in a heck of a fist fight. It was just strictly a fist fight. I think one of the cars had an Indiana license on it. Now, whether that was actually from Indiana or
what, I don't know. But at any rate, they really went at it, and had extreme dislike for one another. It's kind of hard to figure out why they did that.

AP: So, you think there's a lot of tension between the different minority groups?

CT: Oh sure. Yes.

AP: Is there any between them and the Dutch heritage?

CT: No. It seems to me like the Dutch have somewhat avoided it. I don’t think entirely, but it seems like they've somewhat avoided. But, it seems like there's an element in the schools that they don't want to cooperate, they don't want to behave, they don't care if they learn anything. They're going to be the future generation's dishwashers and what have you at McDonald's. That's what they're going to be. They'll probably be not a good credit risk. They will probably need public assistance. They'll have kids and the kids will be not well brought up and the kids will be problems. It's going to be an interesting time. It's really kind of sad. Like I say, I frankly feel sorry for the teachers because the teachers have got to put up with this bologna. It seems like there is not anywhere near the discipline that there used to be. One of the things that when I went to high school, our senior high principle, he would get up in front of the student body every morning, and he would read a portion of the Bible, and he'd say a prayer. That would probably last about fifteen minutes. When he got up in front of the students, there was a podium up there, and he'd get behind the podium and he wouldn't say one word. He would just stand there and he would look. If there was a little noise over here, he would just stare. He would wait until there was absolute dead silence. You could literally hear a pin drop. Then he
would start. He wouldn’t say, "It’s time to come to order," or anything like that. He’d just walk up and stare. That’s all he had to do, the kids had enough sense. It maybe took thirty, forty-five seconds, but he got complete respect and control and everybody shut up. I don’t know if that’d work today. I’ve seen some of the actions of kids. They just seem to have lost a lot of their respect for property and for elders.

AP: How have your priorities changed over your life?

CT: I think everybody, as they get older, they get probably more set in their ways. I don’t think there’s any question about that. Everybody likes to talk about the good old days.

AP: Are there any other major events or major things you’ve been involved with that we haven’t talked about?

CT: Not any that I can think of. I can’t really think of anything real significant. One of the things that has stuck in my memory, and that’s, there was a period of time going back maybe thirty years ago, that Holland had, what a lot of us felt, was a bad mayor, and a bad City Council. At that time, a group of us got together. I think there was probably like thirty people. We tried to think of someone who would be a good mayor and we also tried to think of people who would be good City Council members. We finally landed on three… There’s six wards, so basically four councilmen run every time. You have two councilmen at large. You’ll have one, three, and five run. Then, two years later, it will be two, four, and six, and then the other councilmen at large. But we tried to find a mayor, somebody that we thought would do a good job for mayor, and four good council people. We struck out on the
fellow that we wanted to run for mayor. But we got four people to run for council.
Out of the four, three were elected. One didn’t get elected, but a person that really
was probably as good as our candidate got elected. We didn’t care who they were.
We just wanted to see some better quality in city hall. That completely changed the
tone of city council. City council became much more business oriented, job oriented.
It became far more progressive. Out of that whole thing, one of the councilmen that
we succeeded in supporting and who got elected, he ran for mayor, and got the
mayor’s job. I think you can really see the success of that thing. It was just a group
of people, and I think we all agreed to try to kick in twenty dollars, and twenty
dollars was more like fifty now, but we all agreed to kick in and support the people
and do some telephone calling and this and that. I think that was significant. The
next election we did the same thing. Somebody got on the phone and we got a few
people together and I think, again, around thirty people and did the same thing all
over again. It was just a case of where some of these guys were waiting till the last
minute until literally nobody else had filed and so they’d go down and file. They had
the petitions filled out, and they had the signatures. If somebody really good would
have run, I don’t think they would have run. They would have been afraid that
they’d have gotten beat. But nobody would run, so they’d run. File the last day.
I’m also involved in the Sesquicentennial.

AP: Why don’t you describe, briefly, what you’re doing in the Sesquicentennial.

CT: I’m on the main operating committee and I’m also the co-chairman of the fund raising
committee to raise the money. That’s what I was talking to [points to the phone]...
We’re going to have a meeting next Tuesday morning at 7:30 and we decided to have it that day and just see... We got involved with this fund raising business for the Sesquicentennial over a year ago. Now, we’re roughly half way into the Sesquicentennial year. If there’s anymore money needed... The princess is coming here. We’re going to have a big, double-header ball game on September 21. We’re going to have the Community Day Picnic. It’s going to be a much bigger deal this year. We’re going to have a parade and fire works. And, we’re going to have the Netherlands Chamber Choir. That’s going to be $3,000. Fireworks is $15,000. Ball game is $3,000. The city has set aside $20,000 for the princess’s visit. I’ve been a co-chairman of the fund raising committee.

AP: Is there anything else we should talk about?

CT: I’ll probably think of thirty things, and so will you.

AP: Well, we certainly covered a lot. Thank you for taking the time out to do this.