Van Asperen, Ralph Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Ann Paeth
Oral History Interview with
Ralph Van Asperen

(unedited)

Conducted July 21, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
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AP: The first thing I have everyone do is state their name, their birth date, and where they were born.

RVA: My name is Ralph Van Asperen. My birthday is [date removed], 1932, and I was born in _____, the Netherlands.

AP: How long were you there?

RVA: I was there until the age of eight. Then came to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

AP: How was it that your family came to Grand Rapids?

RVA: My father was a little upset about what they did with the traitors in World War II. There were ones in town. He was upset, so he wanted to come to America.

AP: Do you have any idea how they wound up in Grand Rapids?

RVA: All their friends were here. All the Dutchmen came to Grand Rapids in the Grandville Avenue, Clyde Park area, just congregated there for a while, then split.

AP: How long did you live in Grand Rapids?

RVA: Four years.

AP: And then did you go to Zeeland?

RVA: Yes. I lived in Zeeland for about twenty-two years. Then I’ve been here [in Holland] for twenty years.

AP: So since you came here you’ve been in the western Michigan area, very close?

RVA: Oh yes. I can tell you why we moved to Zeeland. My father was always a baker
in the Netherlands, found an empty store in Zeeland, and thought he'd like to start a bakery there, so he started a bakery, Zeeland Bakery, in 1954. I bought it in 1963, almost ten years after he started it. I was 21 years old, and I bought it from him, because he wanted to slow down.

AP: So he taught you...?

RVA: Everything I know. I started working in the bakery when I was fourteen years old. I had to stand on a bread pan so I could reach the table, because I was too short. After high school in 1960, I worked for him for one year. Then he paid for my college, and I went to college for two years, and then I bought the bakery.

AP: Where did you go to school?

RVA: Davenport. I got a business degree. I was an accountant, but I was bored. I couldn't stand to sit at a desk. The bakery was up for sale, so I thought, "I'll buy it." And I did.

AP: Tell me about your job.

RVA: It's a great job, lousy hours. I've been working the night shift for thirty-four years. I bought Zeeland in '63, and then in 1986 I bought a little bakery in Holland, which was French Pastry on 8th Street. I thought I was going to have two bakeries. However, we ran into some major help problems. One of the helpers in Zeeland asked if I wanted to sell Zeeland, and I said yes. Besides, I was getting kind of sick of starting at one o'clock, so I was going to have this little bakery on 8th Street and start at three o'clock. The problem was, as soon as I bought the bakery on 8th Street, they tore the street up for snow melt. For one and a half years, I had no
business. Then they bought the building and the rent went up too high, so then I moved to Butternut, and they tore that street up for half a year. For two years I had no business.

AP: When you say that they bought the building, who's they?

RVA: Lumir bought the building on 8th Street, and then my rent went up too high. Besides, 8th Street is not a good place for a bakery because you want early morning business. 8th Street is one way. People don’t drive through 8th Street early in the morning. So we moved to Butternut because we did a car count there. Business is super there. Now it’s so busy, I have to start at 10:30 at night, which I really don’t like. But business is great. I have every gas station in Holland, Saugatuck, that we bring rolls to. I have Haworth, Prince, Parke-Davis, Hart & Cooley. We start delivering at 4:30.

AP: So you go in at 10:30, and you’re done...?

RVA: Oh, sometimes it’s seven o’clock in the morning, sometimes nine o’clock in the morning. You know what time you start in a bakery business, but you don’t know what time you’re done. You have to make your orders. Like last night, I thought it was going to be an easy day. We have an answering machine at the bakery. There was a guy in there who wanted a great big order that I didn’t know about until I got there, so it was a long day.

AP: Do you have a specialty?

RVA: No, we do mainly sweet rolls. I do some terrific breads, but I don’t really get into it. We’re so busy with the sweet rolls. Then if I have to start doing the breads and
buns yet, I'd be there longer yet, and I don't want to be there. I work six days a week already. I want a little life.

AP: What do you fill the rest of your days with?

RVA: I love working out in the yard. I have a huge yard here. I golf, but not as much as I used to. I used to be in a league, but now I start so early, I had to quit that. I'm a terrific bowler. I like playing on my computer now.

AP: You were mentioning it was hard to get involved in anything.

RVA: Well, I can't. I go to bed at seven o'clock at night for a little nap before I go to work, and you can't start anything then. You can't join anything. I used to go to basketball games all the time. I can't do that anymore. Holland Christian basketball. It's a trade-off. I like to work. But what are you going to do? You can't say no to people. People say slow down. Yeah, but what are you going to do? I created a monster, is what I did. The problem is a bakery is totally depending on how you make a product. You can't just hire somebody and say, "Hey, run this place." I do have my two sons now working for me. One is full-time, one is part-time. But both of them have seen the hours I worked my whole life, and they really don't want it. It's a great business, but they don't want it. My youngest son, who works full-time, can do everything I can do, except make bread and rolls, which we don't get into too much anymore. We used to. He doesn't decorate cake, I do that. So if he did buy it, he'd have to cut the cake decorating. But he doesn't want it. At least, not yet. We'll see. I think about five more years. I'm 55. When I'm 60, I'm going to think serious about quitting.
AP: Let's talk about the area. You said you were in Zeeland for many years and then you were in Holland. Let's just talk about this area and how it's changed since you've been living in western Michigan.

RVA: Busier. When I was younger, and working for my father, I used to drive to Hamilton on Saturday mornings when I was 14 years old, so he could sleep. See, my dad had the same thing I do, he worked all night, and he was tired. So I'd get in the car and we'd deliver to Hamilton. But you can't do that now, it's too busy. This whole area got too busy. But other than that, I love this area. We have a cottage up by Upper Silver Lake, now. So when I'm done working at four o'clock on Saturday mornings, I get in my car and drive up there. My wife's usually either up there or coming shortly after that. It's a nice place. A little getaway. But I like this area. Western Michigan is a lot like the Netherlands anyway. We're warmer. In the Netherlands, to get into eighty-some degrees is rare. But it's basically the same. Boy, a lot of Dutch people came to this area. Of course, a lot of them went to Canada, too. When I was younger and we took vacations, we always went to Canada to see friends.

AP: What kind of aspect do you see the Dutch heritage playing in Holland, both when you were a kid, and now? Has that changed?

RVA: I don't see the Dutch ever stress it very much. As soon as we came to America, everybody worked to learn English. In fact, there was a newspaper article the other day. The Dutch did everything to learn English and kind of disassociate themselves with the Dutch. I've gotten around to, I have a Dutch sticker on my car, and I'll
fly the Dutch flag under the American flag, that’s the Friesan flag, by the way, that’s not the Dutch flag. And I wear wooden shoes. I’ve kind of gotten back to it. I’m proud of it. I think I did alright for a foreigner. But when I came to America, they actually put us back in school until we could learn English. Which nowadays, that’s kind of downgrading to people. They don’t do it. They put me in a lower grade, and then I went to summer school to make up that grade, and that’s how I caught up with my class. But they put us back a grade until we learned English. Then when we got home, my mom and dad said, "Talk English, we’ve got to learn it." Now when I see my mother, who is still alive, we talk Dutch, because she doesn’t want me to forget it. But I don’t anyway. As soon as I start talking, it switches back. We don’t talk Dutch by the way, we talk Freis, which is a totally different language. Dutch can’t understand us, and we can’t understand them.

When I went back to the Netherlands, and I’ve been back twice, I saw a Friesan on television, and they subtitled it for the Dutch. That’s how different the dialogue is.

AP: Now there are a lot of Spanish speaking children, what do you think now of how the schools are trying to handle that?

RVA: I think they’re doing it wrong. They’re trying to teach them in their own language, and that slows them up. I see kids in McDonald’s order in English and turn around and start talking Spanish to themselves or among each other, and I know they go home and talk Spanish to their parents and they don’t learn it. I don’t know how they dare drive a car if they can’t read the signs. There was a Hispanic with a flat tire, and I couldn’t talk to him. I tried to tell him how to change it, but I couldn’t
talk to him. I don't really want anything political about this, but it upsets me.

When I came to America, I knew they talked English here. They come here, and it's like a whole surprise, people talk English? It bothers me. I had one guy apply for a job, so I hired him. His first question was, when do I get a raise? I said, first you've got to do some work. He worked one day and never showed up again. I don't know where he is. He gave me a wrong phone number and never came back. You cannot get ahead if you can't talk the language. I don't care who you are. I have nothing against foreigners. I'm one. But, talk to me. That's my only problem here. That's the only thing I don't like about Holland anymore. I have an Asian food store right next door to me. They don't talk English. I don't even know if the lady who runs it can talk English. But as soon as they get out of that store, if they finish with their candy wrapper, they trash the parking lot. Bottles, they have these little drinks, they'll just throw them right down and smash them. That's it. Other than that, I love this place. I don't want to get too political here. When we got here in April, they said, "You have six months to learn English."

That's pretty tough to do on summer vacation. In the Netherlands, you only get four weeks off. Four weeks off of school, and two days for Christmas, and that was it. We got no spring vacation, we got no three months off in the summer. Anyway, we had to learn English, and we did pretty good, and they still put us back a grade. But I made it up. My sister never did, my brother never did, but I did. I don't know why, but I did. I think I speak English pretty good. You don't hear an accent, do you? That's another thing that bothers me. If you learn a
foreign language before the age of twelve, you will not have an accent. That’s why they should teach these kids English right away. My sister has no accent, my brother has no accent. My mom and dad did. But my mom can now read books in two languages. I went back to the Netherlands twice. I tell all my cousins, you’re all crazy for living here. America is so much nicer than the Netherlands. It’s so small there. Your houses are almost attached there. You have a yard maybe the size of the porch here. My one cousin came over and he said, "This is all yours?" It just blows their mind. I own the lot next door, and it blows their mind, because they have a little garden, and that’s it. In their houses, if one’s yelling at the other, you can hear them half a block. I went to one town, I lived there two weeks with my uncle, and I walked all four corners in forty-five minutes, and I was back. I started in the middle, walked back, four times, and I was back in forty-five minutes. Down the road, you can see the next town already. They’re into bicycles in Europe, they can do that. You can’t ride to Zeeland on a bicycle. I mean, you can, but I wouldn’t. You can hear the church bells from the next town.

AP: But they still stay separate little towns?

RVA: They’re all little towns. They all have canals. It's kind of cool, but I don’t like it. I like this better.

AP: Has the growth of this area and the growth of Holland, has it bothered you?

RVA: I don’t like all the traffic here on 31. That’s a pain in the butt in the afternoon. The problem is, it’s a great place to live, so everybody wants to live here. I like this area. My oldest son, it just drives him nuts, all this traffic: "Why can’t it be
like it used to be?" We used to cruise 8th Street and go to Russ', the drive in. It was so much more relaxed. Everything changes. Grand Rapids has changed, there's nothing the same anymore. What are you going to do? You can't build a barrier and keep them out. Basically, I still like it.

AP: Having lived in both Holland and Zeeland...

RVA: I still like Zeeland.

AP: Are they really two completely separate entities?

RVA: Yes, I know everybody in Zeeland, yet.

AP: Do you think they should kind of combine?

RVA: Combine? No. I will say one thing: I left Zeeland, my shop, and I was working in Holland here, and we went back to Zeeland about six months later, and that town is so clean. Everybody takes care of their yards. It's so quiet. I can still go to Bosch's at three o'clock in the afternoon, and know everybody that's sitting around this one table. Whereas in Holland, I see people, and I don't know them. But I grew up in Zeeland. So a lot of my friends... I know the mayor, I used to know the police chief, and that's just changed. But I had a business there for twenty-three years right downtown. I was always in Bosch's. I lived above the bakery. That's why I like this yard, by the way. I had no yard for 18 years. I lived right above the bakery, so you're always downtown. I get to Holland, and I like Holland. I love 8th Street, I wish I was still there. But it was not a good place for a bakery. I like 8th Street. I hate malls. What really drove me nuts, is people would drive up to the bakery and say, "I can't find a parking place right in front." I said, "But if
you go to the mall, you’ve got to walk half a block just to get to the front door of the mall, and then you’re still not by a shop." They want a spot right in front of the bakery, but they don’t mind walking in the mall.

AP:  You’ve got to walk all the way in, then you have to walk all the way around to find...

RVA:  To find the shop that you’re going into. And I always go to the wrong door. If that mall had to rely on me, they’d be gone, because I don’t think I’ve been there half a dozen times. The only place I go is Sears, because Sears buys rolls from me. If you buy rolls from me, I don’t care if your prices are higher, I will buy from you. So Sears, everything in this house. We remodeled the whole downstairs, and all the appliances, the washer and dryer, my lawn mower, everything Sears. But they buy rolls from me, so... I still like it, but I liked Holland better in the 60s. But you’re not going to go back to that. I don’t like the north side. I absolutely cannot stand going there in the afternoon. Going down River, that street—we have to have another way to the north side, but we don’t. That street will drive you nuts. Then Padnos will run that train across. The lights don’t mesh. At night, when I go to work, every light clicks. I can start here, and I will always hit the light red at 32nd Street, but after that, I can hit them all green.

AP:  During the day, they’re timed horribly.

RVA:  I don’t know why they change them, but at night they all go in sequence. I was standing there waiting by 10th the other day, and all of a sudden, 9th turned red, and I was standing in the middle of 10th intersection.
I like the south side. It’s so quiet here. There’s a big subdivision there, but you wouldn’t know it. The shore is back there. The Brooks family bought the old ski lodge there, they bought that whole area for two homes there, so that will always be woods. Henry Walters usually grows flowers, he’s got some rye there now because I complained about the dust blowing. This corner lot has never sold. It used to be busier here when Point West was open. Then the people would come down here and go to Point West. That’s slowed up now. That makes me sick. That Point West restaurant gone. That was such an experience. Now you can’t even park there anymore. Van Andel bought it and tore it down, tore the motel down, the whole resort is gone.

AP: Why?

RVA: Because he didn’t like the traffic, probably. We used to ride our bikes to the lighthouse. but they put a gate across there. Now technically, I think we can go under that gate, but it still stops people. And they’ve got a guard up there. As soon as you drive up, he steps out. He can’t stop you, but he does. I went there the other night, I just wanted to sit by the lake. But you’ve got to turn around right there. I really don’t, I can go around that resort area, but there’s no place to park. They took all the parking away. Now if you want to go to the lighthouse, they’ve got so much hassle there. And half my stuff up at my cottage, I’ve got a big mantle, all Big Red lighthouse stuff. But I can’t go out there anymore. We used to take lawn chairs on our bikes and then sit on the pier and watch boats go out Sunday afternoons. We can’t do that. Well, I think we can do that, yet, but we
don’t, because now we’ve got that cottage.

AP: We were just talking about that today at the office, how difficult it was to get out to the restaurant.

RVA: When Point West was there, there was a parking lot here, and a parking lot there, so people, and they shouldn’t have done that, but they did use that parking lot. There’s a sidewalk that runs right by the cottages to the lighthouse. These cottagers, it’s still there, but now Van Andel put a gate right there. Now, you can go under the gate, but I don’t even think it’s legal to put the gate there, but nobody says anything. Money talks, that’s the problem. It’s a shame. What else bothers me is, I always take South Shore Drive. There used to be cottages there, you could see the water. Now people buy the cottages, tear the cottage down, and build them three times as big and wide, and you can’t see the lake anymore. Or they’ll buy one lot, tear the cottage down, and build two cottages where there was one. You can hardly ever see the lake anymore. That kind of stuff. I guess it’s legal. They do it. What’s the one next to DeNooyer’s old mansion. I always thought DeNooyer’s was a big house—that’s not even the biggest house on South Shore Drive anymore.

You notice I have a windmill in my yard. I have one up at the cottage, too, so we do stress the Dutch a little.

AP: Were you here when they brought the windmill over?

RVA: Oh yes. They bought it, disassembled it in the Netherlands, and reassembled it here.
AP: Was that a really exciting thing for most people in the area?

RVA: I’ve never been out to Windmill Island. Now they want to build houses there. My brother-in-law is really involved in that, and so is his brother, my sister’s husband. But why would you want to do that? You’ve got that one road in and out. Then you’ve got another traffic jam.

AP: And they want to even bring the houses over from the Netherlands?

RVA: First of all, did you know that you cannot repaint a house in the Netherlands without government permission? Every house is an historical... they’re all so old. Our house there was red with a green door when we left there fifty years ago. It’s still red with a green door. You cannot change it. We used to have a bakery in the Netherlands, too. That was right in the house. That’s why we’re bakers. I’m a fifth generation baker now. My son is now number six.

AP: I know that when they wanted the windmill, they had to get a special act of government because windmills are protected properties and cannot be exported.

Which I thought was funny that they would make a law, because I didn’t think that many people would want to.

RVA: When you think windmill, you think the Netherlands, except Don Quixote. They want to keep those windmills that they’ve got. You can’t tear a windmill down there. We used to go ice skating on the canals, but never by a windmill. Windmills churn up the water, and the ice is always thin. So if you ever ice skate on a canal over there, never by a windmill.

AP: Do you have any thoughts on the role of the church in Holland?
RVA: I used to.

AP: Has it changed?

RVA: Yes. When I came to America here, and then in Zeeland, nothing was done on Sunday. We couldn't even ride bicycles on Sunday. Then this one family, in fact, I hired this kid, he rode his bicycle on Sunday. I said, "How can you do that?" They came from Canada, and Canada is even spaced farther apart than America. He said, unless you ride your bicycle, you couldn't see anybody. So there they rode their bikes. When he came to Zeeland, he started riding his bike. Pretty soon, everybody was. In fact, I hired this kid, two weeks after he got to America. He is now the eye doctor in Zeeland. His brother, by the way, bought my bakery. The other son in the family owns the Parkway and James Street Inn, so they did alright. So I always get my glasses at a discount. But there wasn't a store open. Now all of the stores, except on 8th Street, are, and nobody thinks anything of it anymore. But every community has that problem. We didn't mow grass on Sunday. I still don't. The same percentage of people go to church, but I think they're more laxed. We couldn't watch television. We do now. However, my dad didn't think anything of taking a ride on Sunday afternoon, that was a thing, we took a ride on Sunday afternoon. But we couldn't ride our bicycles, so it was kind of hypocritical.

AP: Has the nature of the church here changed at all?

RVA: I don't go to church here. We go to church up north. This cottage is year round, and we joined the church up in Mears. For a little church, we have a terrific choir.
I sing in the choir. We have a terrific little choir up there, and the minister is super, so we go to church up there now. But it’s only one church service on Sunday, where we used to have two here. I couldn’t join the church here because I’m usually going to bed already. We just don’t go to church anymore because we’re always up here.

AP: We talked about schooling regarding people of different ethnicities coming into Holland. Have you seen any other impact on this area due to the large immigration coming in? How has that affected things?

RVA: There’s got to be about a third Hispanics in town now, right? I get really upset about this, because they complain that there’s no Hispanics on the Chamber of Commerce, so they started their own, but they don’t have any whites on it. In fact, I had to decorate a cake for them, so they gave me their brochure to copy a picture of, the whole thing was in Spanish. I don’t know. Some of them are just beautiful people, a lot of them shop in the bakery, and I have a ball with them, but these people all talk English. Then I have no problem with it. It’s when they won’t talk English and they can. That’s when I have a problem with it. Some of them do.

They come in the store and they don’t talk English. They can, but they just won’t. Was it a big surprise when you came to America that we talk English here? If you’re going to take the fruits then you have to do a little work at it. What really bothers me is these leaders, they’re always talking about these old minorities and so on, but they never say, get an education. That’s the only way out of poverty anyway. I don’t care if you’re white, black, Hispanic, green, purple... If you can’t
talk, you are not going to get a job. But I think they're beautiful people. In fact, a couple of my friends are Hispanics, and I say if we can figure out what DNA they have, because I never saw a bald Spanish guy, if we can get that DNA, we could be millionaires, because whites lose their hair and Hispanics don’t, so they’ve got to have something in their DNA system that we don’t have. Rios, he just goes nuts when I tell him that. I say, "Come on Rios, did you figure it out yet? We could be millionaires." I like everybody. I just want them to talk to me. You’re never going to trust somebody you can’t understand. If you’re living next door to someone and you can’t understand what they’re saying, you’re not going to trust them. The problem is, the crime rate’s gone up since then. I don’t want to blame that on anyone. There’s bad whites, there’s bad everybody.

AP: So it’s probably more due to the size.

RVA: I hope so. It’s just bigger than it used to be. The other night, you know, we’re up all night, I see kids at three o’clock in the morning roaming in front of the bakery. So the other morning, at ten to five, this one lady that works for me smokes, so she goes out to have a cigarette. There were four kids there with a baseball bat. They had been looking for a fight since one o’clock. None of them were over fourteen. Now, if I wasn’t home by eleven, my dad went out looking for me. These kids were roaming the streets at five o’clock in the morning, had been since one. But the problem is, families are splitting more than they used to. I’m divorced and remarried. That’s not good.

AP: You mentioned earlier the key to success is education. I was just wondering what
you’ve seen the roles of the different schools in this area as. Davenport, Hope, etc.

RVA: Davenport lost all of my records. They didn’t even know I was an alumni, until I wrote them about four years ago. They finally found my records, and now I keep getting mail for contributions. (laughs) I don’t know about these charter schools. Do you have to pay to go to those? I don’t follow it.

AP: I think what’s happening is this is something that’s ended hurting the public schools, because the kids that would have gone to the public schools go to the charter school and they get funded by student.

RVA: Right. But I thought you had to pay to go to those charter schools. See, I had private education, I went to Holland Christian and Zeeland Christian. I think schools are still doing a good job. They just have to teach them to talk English, otherwise, if you don’t, there’s 90% of the jobs you can’t do. You can’t work in a store, you can’t read directions. That’s the part that bothers me. Then they say you’re discriminating if you do that. Come on, we all had to go through that. I know the Dutch talked Dutch when they first got here. But as soon as they started trading outside of town, they switched. You have to. Other than that, I think schools are fine here. I think we’ve got some great schools in this area. My grandkids go to Zeeland. I have never figured out tenure, though. Why does a teacher have to be tenured? If you work in a shop, you’re not tenured. Why does a teacher have to be? Why is it so tough to get rid of the bad ones? That’s what tenure does. You read stories of what they do, and they still can’t even can them.

AP: The biggest difference I’ve seen on the college level is that when a professor is
tenured, they no longer have to have their students fill out evaluation. So you're not required to seek out student feedback once you're tenured.

RVA: I have a couple of friends who are teachers. Now I have to go in and I have to do my work everyday. I have no choice. I either have that, or I have no money. One day, he says, "I didn't feel like teaching today, so you know what I did, I just showed movies." I can't do that. Now, when I was in school, I loved movies. It was cool when the teacher showed movies. But that bothers me. My brother-in-law was a teacher. He just retired last year. Now he's bored silly. Fifty-eight years old and retired, that must be night. But now he's bored silly. (tape ends)

I still like this area. It's much better than the north side--too busy. We've got a park down the road, and now they're going to build a new one. They bought forty acres from DenUyl, and they're going to call it Sanctuary Woods. They've already got the sign up. Right down the road, they've got Walters Park, that the Walter family donated. That's cool. This one's going to go right up the dunes. My wife used to work for DenUyl. In fact, the Hatch Restaurant, he was going to remodel it. In the entrance, he had a scene of a fishing village made out of wood. That was the first thing you saw when you walked in the restaurant. My wife said, "What are you going to do with that?" He said, "I don't know." She said, "My husband just built a fireplace down in the basement. Can we have that?" And I have that scene, made out of wood, it's gorgeous.

AP: Have there been any controversies or issues that you can remember?

RVA: There's always controversy, but not any major ones. They used to give me tickets
whenever I delivered a wedding cake. The Zeeland Police always gave me tickets when I delivered a wedding cake to a church, because I would park in a no parking zone. The newer wedding cakes, by the way, are all separated by tiers. But when we first started the bakery, they were all put together at the bakery. You put them in your truck, you drove real slow to the church, and you carried it in all in one piece. Well, even nowadays, you can't park two blocks down. They used to give me a ticket every time I delivered a wedding cake. Finally I took them to court. I said, this is ridiculous. They don't give semi-trucks tickets when they've double parked to unload. Why me? Just because my truck's smaller? The judge agreed with me, so I won. But they still did it. So I just started bringing them to the mayor. I run into that chief of police up north, and we're good friends, but when I was younger, he just wanted to give me a ticket all the time. Now I don't do wedding cakes anymore, because they're too much of a hassle. They've got to be delivered on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons. Those are the only two times when I can play golf, so I quit. And it's too much hassle. If somebody wants to order a wedding cake, it takes about forty-five minutes to get all the details, they'll call you four or five times, thinking they're your only customer, if you have to deliver to a restaurant, they're not set up yet. They don't think nothing of making you wait a half hour to an hour while they set up, like your time isn't worth anything. So I don't do that anymore. I did thousands of them, but not anymore. That's the only controversy I ever ran into.

AP: Now a lot of people mention the area center.
RVA: Now, I think putting that thing down on the water front on 7th or 6th street down there, I think that’s better than 16th Street. Maybe not for the traffic, but it’s like Van Andel in Grand Rapids. It spurs new restaurants. The restaurants there are going to do better. Anytime you congregate it down town, it’s going to be better for the downtown area. Sticking it out on 16th Street, maybe it’s easier to get in and out of, but if it’s on 7th Street, you could go down there, walk around town, have something to eat, a couple of drinks, and go to something. Whereas, if it’s on 16th Street, you only go there for the event. Unless they start building around 16th street, and they probably would, then, anyway.

AP: But there’s a lot of space really left to develop in the downtown area. 7th and 9th Street really don’t have any businesses on them, and they could.

RVA: It’s unbelievable. I know that. I think it should be downtown. I think that they almost moved too fast on that. Stick to downtown. Even though I’m not in downtown anymore, I still like the downtown. It’s just, the rent got a little too high for a little bakery. We sell rolls at fifty cents a piece, not big stuff. I didn’t even get out of there because of the rent. It was a good excuse to move because there was no business there early in the morning. I had a lot of business, cup of coffee and a cookie, lunch, all day, but you can’t make money on a cup of coffee and a cookie. Here I have people walk in for one, two, three, four dozen to take to work, and it’s more money. But I think the area center should be downtown. I think that’s a terrific idea. I also think that Holland doesn’t use their waterfront right. I don’t know how they can do it right. I love the way Grand Haven does it.
Their waterfront runs right next to downtown. You can sit on the grass and watch the boats go by. Right across the street is downtown. But our water isn’t that close, and the water we do have, you can’t put boats in. Their marinas are all here, and the only way they can get to Lake Michigan is to go right by downtown. They just built that whole waterfront up nice. You can sit there and watch the boats. You can even eat in a couple of the restaurants and watch the boats go by. Holland should do more from Padnos out. That old building on Lake Street there, just past the Civic Center, with Kollen Park. The only problem is there’s a few buildings in between there. Next to Heinz in Kollen Park, there’s a gap there, they should do much more with that. However, I just read now where he wants to move the road back in Kollen Park. The road is the thing there right along the water. The people have to sit on the other side of the road. So they want to make it now where the road is back farther and the waterfront is where the people sit. But I still think Holland needs a marina. That’s how one mayor got beat. He wanted a marina and he got beat in the election. Any other town, you can take a boat, dock it, go into town and eat or something, even stay over night. But you can’t do it in Holland. There is no marina close enough with public spaces to downtown where you can go shopping, stay in a motel or something, and go back up. There’s no place. Next to Kollen Park would have been perfect. I think they need to do more with the waterfront. Problem is, it’s expensive. I think Lumir, even though they bought my building and increased my rent so high, has really done a lot for downtown. It takes time. Nothing happens overnight anymore.
So how do you get this job?

AP: I went to Hope.

RVA: That's grown a lot, too. My wife used to work at Hope. She was secretary to the dean of chemistry, Sheldon W______, who is now a head of a college in Illinois.

AP: What kind of role has Hope had in the community?

RVA: They buy a lot of downtown dilapidated houses, tears them down, and put up nice buildings. See, I don't do much. I'd love to go to their theater, I love plays, but I can't go. I think it's positive. I don't see any downfall to it.

AP: Does it interact with the community well?

RVA: Kids used to come in the bakery all the time. They've got to help downtown business, those kids. Other than the occasional parties I read about, there's no trouble. I know older people are too loud sometimes. Me. I think Hope is good. Of course, they should build a bigger basketball court, so we can have as big a one as Calvin's got. That's why we've got to get going on the area center. When I retire, then I can go to all that stuff. We need that there. Did you hear about the controversy in Grand Haven? This morning I heard that they built a skateboard park for skate boarders, which Holland wants to do. Except they had a riot there last week because they're charging these kids three bucks, and the kids think they have the right to do this for nothing. But the city says, it takes three bucks to have supervision and for insurance. But the kids think it's just like any other park. So they fenced it off and closed it up. The guy on the radio said, what are you going to do? They're both right. Do they charge for the pool? You can go to
Smallenburg Park or Kollen Park, and that's all free.

AP: Do you think we need a gathering place for teens? The teens can't gather any place without loitering.

RVA: We didn't have anything when we were young. There was one place in Zeeland called the youth center. It was only open on Tuesday and Thursday nights. It had a nine-foot basket I could dunk. But that's the only thing we had. Otherwise, we just made out own fun. We never thought somebody had to make fun for us. We used to hang out at Frank's and play the pinball machine forever because they were a nickel, and you could win free games, and we knew how to win. When I was young in Grand Rapids, we used to pay kick-the-can and hide-and-go-seek at night. We could ride motor bikes at fourteen. You can't do that now until you're sixteen. I had my own car at sixteen. My daddy gave me one. (laughs) So we were cruising all over in those days. I don't know what it's like to be young anymore. I don't know if we have to build things for everybody all the time and make everybody happy.

AP: What most kids do and have done for years is just cruise. But a lot of small towns now are trying to get rid of cruising. The kids say now they have nothing to do.

RVA: Yes, we cruised 8th Street, hung around Russ'. But I would never think of doing anything that would hurt anybody. These guy that works for me, his son just got a brand new Suburban, and somebody keyed it from one end to another. I wouldn't do that! I told my kids, if I ever find out that you damaged somebody's property hanging around there, I'll throw you in jail myself. First of all, we used to be
afraid of police. They’re not afraid of police anymore. The whole attitude is different. We were scared to death of cops. On Halloween we used to throw a few pumpkins on the road. We never did anything else. First of all, kids are growing up too quick. I think television has a lot to do with that. All this garbage. I’m not really as bad as I sound, but I do think there’s a lot of garbage on TV. Kids see it. People get killed on TV and nothing of it. Think about it, there’s got to be a funeral, there’s got to be unhappy people, but they don’t show that part on TV.

When I grew up, my dad had a seven-inch TV set we rented. On New Year’s Eve we watched the Rose Bowl Parade, then we brought it back to the shop. I never did watch much television when I was younger. Not even now. But I think kids are braver, know more, don’t have respect for elders like they used to. But then again, there’s good ones, too. I have two sons that are totally different. One is quiet, and the other one doesn’t like authority. I have trouble with him at work. The other problem is, I didn’t have these kids when they were younger, either. Their mother left me for another guy when they were four and three. So they never grew up with me. What can you do? And I think that’s the problem with a lot of families. There’s single families. This one kid that the lady saw, she knew him. She said he lives with his dad in Pullman, but his mother lives in the trailer park right behind the bakery, that’s who he was staying with.

AP: Are there any last things we should talk about that we haven’t gotten a chance to?

RVA: No. I think they ought to build that area center in town. How’s that youth center doing on 7th Street? It’s got to be open now. That’s a place for kids to hang out.
The problem is, if you build a skate park, they’re all going to congregate. Kids do more in a group. We had more guts when we had three or four guys around than we did alone. That’s another problem, when they all congregate in one spot. I ride in town on 17th Street, and once in a while, you see about twenty-five kids on somebody’s front yard. Now the cops are sitting about a block away, just waiting for trouble already. All the kids in one area isn’t so good, either. When we were cruising, we were all in one area, but we were still all separate. But the strip... In my day, cars all had the same engine. You either had the fastest car, or you didn’t. Nowadays, they all come in different sizes, different size engines and things you can put on them. So even if it’s the same care, it’s not the same anymore. My friend had the fastest 1955 Chevy, because they all came out with 283 V8’s. But I still don’t every remember dragging. We never did that. But my car was so slow, a bicycle would beat me in a drag. I had a ’52 Mercury. That was the slowest car in the history of mankind. It got me wherever I wanted to go. Now when I think about it, I know nothing about engines, I think the head gaskets were blown. But it ran all the time, and I got it for nothing, and it was maroon and white, and I was going to Holland Christian whose colors are maroon and white, so it was the class car. When I was younger, though, I had to leave school and go back to Zeeland and clean the bakery. I have worked my whole life. That’s why, I didn’t have time to get into trouble. Saturday mornings my dad would get me up at four in the morning to fry the donuts, so I was always tired on Saturday night. That’s why I didn’t do anything bad.
That must be it.

That's it. Work them. But the problem is, you can't hire younger kids nowadays, because now there's all these rules. I think sometimes all these rules to protect kids are hurting kids. I have a granddaughter now who's thirteen. She wanted to work for me. I said, you're too young, I can't even hire you. I think I could maybe a year from now, because she's related. But there are still certain hours I couldn't have her work. See, we didn't have that. My dad got me up at four o'clock, said get your butt down there, and it didn't hurt me. I graduated in 1960 and I have never missed a day of work yet. If I'm scheduled to work, I'm there. I've never been sick. I cut my finger with the lawn mower one night and went to work the next day. The bone was sticking up, I wrapped it up, and went to work. There's no money if I don't work. It didn't hurt anyway. It stopped bleeding right away and didn't hurt. It looked awful, so I just put those finger cots on it while I was working. As soon as I got done working, I'd pull it off, and in six weeks it all healed up. Never stitched, but I can pound nails with it. There's no feeling, all the nerves are gone. I don't know. I'm not the most interesting guy. I'm sorry. I just work too much, I don't do anything.

Well, I think if there's nothing else, we can probably just wrap up. We talked about most of the things we always talked about. Thank you.

You're welcome. Good luck.