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Vande Water, Randy Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Randy Vande Water

Conducted October 26, 1998
by John Maassen

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Randy Vande Water
October 26, 1998
Interviewer: John Maassen

JM: Would you tell us where you were born and when?

RVW: I was born in Zeeland, Michigan, on [date removed], 1930. My dad was a school teacher at Zeeland High School. He was also the coach of various athletic teams. My mother was a housewife, and we lived in Zeeland until 1937. My dad was no longer teaching at that time. He was working with the Bureau of Social Aid, which was the welfare system of the '30s, during the Depression. So he could work either in Holland or Zeeland. So when my grandfather died, we lived at 201 West 15th Street. My mother felt that she should be with her mother, and so we lived with the three generations at that particular residence. In 1939, my parents built a home and my grandmother lived with us all of the time that she lived. She died in 1953. So we were living with three generations under one roof.

JM: So you know all about an extended family. (laughs)

RVW: Exactly. I asked my grandma several things, and she told me a lot of things, but there were so many things that she didn't tell that I wished that she had that would have been just first person recollections of things that she could have told me. She was born in 1868, married in 1895.

JM: Was your father an immigrant?

RVW: He was not. His father was born in the Netherlands. He was the oldest son of his family, and there were seven children in that family. His grandfather had been

married and his wife died in the Netherlands. He remarried, and then remarried again, so he had a total of fourteen children. He also lived to be ninety years old, so I knew my great-grandfather. He was sexton in the cemetery for twenty-seven and a half years.

JM: What cemetery was that?

RVW: Pilgrim Home Cemetery.

JM: Oh, here in Holland.

RVW: Yes. So he came to the United States in 1882. On the other side of the family, my mother's family, came in the June wave of immigrants who came to Holland. They were the Van Lentes. Johannes Van Lente, his father name was Frederick. The claim that they have to some fame locally is that they built...he was a carpenter and a cooper, so they built the pillars of the Pillar Church. That has been documented by the family. His parents were friends of Dr. Van Raalte. Dr. Van Raalte, although he didn't have slaves or anything like that, felt a need to support the Union. He asked for these people to go to the service. My great-grandfather, who's name was Johannes Van Lente, went and signed up with Ben and Dirk Van Raalte. This whole group left together, and the Tebbs Bend story has been well documented. He, fortunately, put a lot of letters together. Janice Van Lente took all of those letters which she received from her grandmother--they were in Dutch, but she got them translated--so the letters of Johannes Van Lente are not only published, but they are on record at the museum. So my grandmother on my dad's side was a Van Oort. They came as immigrants also in the late 1800s. I would say

around 1880 or so. While the Van Lentes came in June of 1847, they had to borrow four hundred dollars so they could get over here, which I think was common of people who were not of great means. Then on my other side, my grandfather was Van Ry. I don't know too much about him other than that he was a half-brother of the Raffenaud family. He spent a lot of time on the Great Lakes until he married, and then he became like my other grandfather. They were both foremen in furniture factories in Holland. My grandfather Van Ry died in 1937, and that is why we moved to Holland. My grandfather Vande Water died in 1940.

JM: Now you talked about the June wave, you mean the June wave of immigration of 1847?

RVW: Yes, I use the word wave. I assume they were not the only family to come.

JM: I see. In other words, they weren't the original, but came over...

RVW: They weren't here in February and they didn't come with Binnecant and Keppel and Vander Haar from St. Louis in March. They did come in June. But they were friends of Van Raalte including in 1864, my great-grandfather was in a hospital in which Dirk Van Raalte was in that hospital. So he was able to write back here and tell the condition of Dirk, who lost his arm. My great-grandfather was not wounded. But he was in a position working as a cook in that hospital. He was not able to go back in battle. He suffered some lung conditions which, according to my grandmother, caused him not to be a carpenter or cooper after the war. They lived on 12th Street, right across from what was later named Centennial Park. He became somewhat of a stone mason, and according to family stories, built the fountain in

Centennial Park.

JM: Your father was a school teacher, so obviously he went to college. That would be the first perhaps in your family?

RVW: Yes, I'll speak about that. My mother graduated from high school in 1920. My dad graduated from high school in 1920.

JM: That was in Zeeland?

RVW: No, from Holland High School. My mother chose to be a secretary at the Thompson Furniture Company which was on 12th Street. It is now the Hope College Art Department. Finances being what they were, I guess my mother could not go to college, at least to Hope College. My dad worked at the post office. He planned to be a post office person. He worked a couple years, and had his own route in Holland. But he decided that he wanted to be a teacher and a coach. At that particular time, you could go to Western Michigan, which was Western State Normal. So he took a course there for a couple of years which gave him, what he referred to as, a life-time certificate. When he graduated from Western, he was offered a teaching/coaching position in Fremont, Michigan. They went to Fremont and taught there for a couple of years. Then he was offered a position in Hammond, Indiana, and he went there. Then in the fall of 1929, just prior to the Depression, he started teaching at Zeeland High School. Then I was born the following spring. My dad was very interested in newspaper work, always. He never did it full-time. He was writing for The Sentinel in the '20s. We have family clippings of his writing for the Kalamazoo Gazette when he was in Kalamazoo.

Writing for The Sentinel, he wrote sports, he wrote a number of things. He was their reporter. One story that I had done in one of my books, indicates that he was doing the announcing at the Holland Fair. Whether he did it himself, or whether he was asked to do it...Knowing my dad, he probably came up with the idea to do it himself. He got to ride in a biplane, airplane, for the first time that they had an airplane at the Fair, and then write about it. That was in 1924. That was right about that same time when he was going to college. But he had this great interest in newspaper work.

JM: Now tell me about your immediate family, first, before we get back into this. You were born of course in 1930.

RVW: Right. I am an only child. So I had no brothers and sisters.

JM: While we're talking about those specific items, you have children?

RVW: Yes, Mary and I have three children. She has two children, and I have one daughter.

JM: Are they in the neighborhood?

RVW: Daughter is living in Texas. Her name is Nancy. She is a graduate of Hope College. She and her husband are in Texas. They have been there since 1981. They are teachers. Her husband, who had been at Hope College, didn't finish his work until he got to Texas. So he graduated from the University of Texas at Tyler. They teach in Tyler, Texas. Daughter Kathryn--her name is Kathryn Stam--she has a position of responsibility. She's in charge of clinical care at Holland Hospital. Mary's son is Kenneth Stam, who is self-employed as a building contractor. He

lives in Holland, and Kathryn lives in Cutlerville. She has one daughter, and Kenneth has twin daughters.

JM: So you have grandchildren.

RVW: Yes. Nancy has three, so a total of six.

JM: Let's get back to the newspaper, because as we said earlier, this is really what makes your career quite unique here in Holland. Can you give us, rather briefly, the history of newspaper here in Holland? What was the first newspaper, and how did that all develop?

RVW: From what I have read, we had newspapers back in the 1850s. Then we had the paper called the De Grondwet and then we had De Hollander. De Grondwet means "constitution." The reason for the De Hollander was something that happened in Holland quite often in the '60s and '70s. There was a need for an English speaking newspaper. John Roost started the De Hollander. He was a Republican. The De Grondwet for the most part represented the Democratic philosophy of the 1860s. There was also the De Wachter and the De Hope. Now the De Hope was published by Mr. Oggel. It had its printing facilities right on the Hope College campus. This was a paper, particularly for my interest, did an excellent job of covering the Holland fire. So that's one paper that I've studied in studying the Holland fire.

JM: Are you able to read Dutch?

RVW: No, I am not able to read Dutch, but fortunately I do have friends who could translate it for me. One of those was Grace Antoon who was the secretary to Willard Wichers at that Netherlands Information Service in the City Hall. I noticed

also here in talking about this De Grondwet, that during the time of what we will call, in a one word definition, the "schism" which resulted in the formation of the Christian Reformed Church, first in 1857, and then in 1882, that the De Grondwet circulation really soared, particularly in 1882 when the paper then said that circulation went from 300 to 3,000, recognizing that there were people of similar persuasion throughout the country.

JM: In other words, it became more than a local paper.

RVW: Yes, it was an example of a national paper. The people who lived in Iowa and points west were using the De Grondwet to find out what was going on here. The De Grondwet files show, again in Dutch, how this whole debate was going on. Now Van Raalte had died, so it was that particular debate led by people like Tunis Keppel.

JM: When I was a child, we got the Volksvriend. Have you heard of the Volksvriend?

RVW: No, I have not.

JM: That was a similar paper coming out of northwest Iowa, but it also had a national distribution list amongst the Dutch immigrants. How long was the De Grondwet in existence?

RVW: I'm not sure specifically as to when it discontinued. I would say around the first World War. It was replaced by the De Wachter.

JM: There must have been an English paper, however, before that? I mean, prior to the first World War?

RVW: Right. The Holland City News. In my research, I spent a lot of time with The

Holland City News because, first of all it was locally owned, and it was written by local people, so you have that local flavor right from the start. It was owned by Leendart Mulder, and it was started in 1872.

RVW: I saw his gravestone just last week, because I had to do a cemetery tour and that was one that was right near the sidewalk, and very convenient for walking. I do think he played a major role in the newspapering of the community. Also, he hired editors who were familiar with the community, including a fellow by the name of Gerrit Van Schelven, who was editor during the '90s, after having served in the Civil War. He wore a number of hats in Holland, but in particular was the editor. He saw the need, at least I believe so, and I know Dr. Elton Bruins feels the same way, in chronicling Holland, so that they have really given us complete stories on the business of the public schools in Holland, the role it played, as compared to Van Raalte, who also believed in public schools, but he also wanted to have this private school, and this business of the academy. Now Hope College was already in existence when The Holland City News started, so it was important to explain the role that the college was playing in the community and that basically was what was always covered also.

JM: Was that a weekly?

RVW: The City News was always a weekly. It never became a daily. There was another paper that was started in 1889. That was the Ottawa County Times. Early in Holland's history, when the people were first allowed to vote, there was a short waiting period of time, in some cases it was 18 months, and then other times it was

6 months. The people who came from the Netherlands were basically Democrat, voting the Democrat persuasion. A short answer would be that they felt that the Democratic party nationally didn't have as many restrictions as the Whig, or later the Republican party, had for immigrants. They thought that they could become "citizens" and voting citizens and responsible citizens before the other party. But then Holland changed, comparable to about the time of the fire in Holland. Led by people like Isaac Cappon, who had been very successful; the Civil War had made him a wealthy man with all of his hides, and he saddle bags and different things for the Union army. The city became incorporated in 1867, and after that it was pretty much Republican. A fellow named M. G. Manting started the Ottawa County Times. This was a paper that started just after the Harrison-Cleveland election. It was the Democratic voice of Holland and Ottawa County. It served that particular time until it was absorbed in 1908, but I don't want to get ahead of the story. In 1896, July 1, is when The Holland Daily Sentinel appeared for the first time. It was published by a retired Methodist minister. His name was Reverend Nelis Klok. He does not list his name in the first edition. I have seen the first edition of The Sentinel; his name is not in it. First of all, they had published above a building on East 8th Street and then they moved, and were about where the post office is now. Then they moved to another site over on West 8th Street, behind the Model Drug Store. They stayed there for some time, and then they moved to 21 East 8th Street, which is now Del's Music Center. So you can see they were moving around. They didn't have a particular building. But in 1907, after Klok had sold the paper to a

Roland Isley of Benton Harbor, and I don't know anything about Roland Isley other than he was a businessman who bought this particular newspaper. He in turn quickly sold it to Ben Van Raalte, who we mentioned earlier. He was an implement dealer. He had the first telephone in downtown Holland.

JM: How is he related to the Dominie?

RVW: He was one of his sons. His partners were Adrian Westveer and Henry Geerlings. Henry Geerlings had been trained at Western Seminary, but had chosen never to take up a pulpit. So he worked, first, in the newspaper. Then later, as I remember him, he was the mayor of the community as an older man, and was a banker. Not the owner of the bank, but just worked in the bank as a teller. They owned the paper. They kept the paper until they sold it in the '20s. Moving ahead, there were a few other owners in that period of time, but they were local owners because they wanted to keep the paper local. So they concentrated on having a local paper in the '20s. But the important move, I think, was January 1, 1928, when the local owners decided to sell to a fellow by the name of Charles A. French.

JM: Can we interrupt at that point? We're at a point now when I think we're talking about a local paper, and yet there must have been the pressure to publish national events as well. Now how did those national events come? Was it through the telegraph in the earlier years?

RVW: No, it remained a local paper, and it meant setting that type, and getting the stories. I think that they did a good job. That was their means of communication. Some stories in today's world, you'd think those certainly be subject for court suits and

things like that. But they were willing to write graphically, if it was an alleged murder or whatever. But it was all local, and heavy advertising. There was no qualms about putting half of the front page would be advertising. A big advertiser in those early days, and who believed in newspaper advertising, was the James Brouwer Furniture Company, and the Meyer Company. Mr. Meyer and Mr. Brouwer had been together a little earlier, but Mr. Meyer had the music company. There were other companies. Before cement blocks came along, the Waverly Stone Quarry advertised, and the Stevenson Jewelry. Those people would run a quarter page, sometimes half page, and sometimes even a full page. There wouldn't be a full page ad on the front page, but I'd say it would be on the back page. They were willing to support the paper in that way. So in turn they also received what I called in later days, pocketbook journalism. Because you would read in the news columns, just like you would read where Mr. and Mrs. Jones were married and Mrs. Jones was the former Miss Smith, the next item might say that carpet or furniture was available at Brouwers for whatever, and that was their special for that week. So that's what they did.

JM: What did the newspaper cost at that time per copy?

RVW: It was a penny, sometimes two cents. But for many times, of course and newspapers still do, depend on advertising. That took care of the actual selling of the paper, actual copies. The important thing was to get it in the hands of the reader, and they wanted to make it that it was not something that was prohibited.

JM: For many years as I remember my youth with the Holland paper, there was always

some sections that had to do with Borculo, North Holland, Overisel.

RVW: Right, that was very important. I entered in that era at The Sentinel when I came in as a cub, or a part-time person while I was in high school. That was what we called in the slang expression, we called it barnyard. But we recognized that we had to have correspondents, either men or women for the most part usually women, who would go around starting with the church bulletin of that particular church. In many of the smaller towns, they were not incorporated towns and villages like Beaverdam. And I'm not sure about Beaverdam, but you would have a Christian Reformed and a Reformed Church. Therefore you had two elements of news coming from two sources. The one person getting the news from that particular church and then checking with her friend and getting it from the other church. That took care, because the church is such a major part of the community, that would take care of illnesses, and things like that.

JM: Even visitations, so and so visited so and so.

RVW: Right, exactly. And in some of those cases, it would be the reporter would cover all of her moves or her sister's moves and sometimes that became, in later years, kind of an editing thing, because it got to be somewhat of a smile to people. That was very important, and I will say, jumping ahead a little bit on the story, that we continued that column religiously, until we were purchased by a big corporation. One of the first things that left, and being the managing editor when that did leave, I remember being in the discussions. There really wasn't a lot of dialogue on it, it was just that we were told that we would drop those particular columns. Some of

them had dropped by themselves because there just wasn't anyone there who wanted to do it anymore. A few of the areas did drop. For the most part, we always had the Bentheims, the South Olives, and the Graafchaps. Zeeland had its own, but we also tried to have a reporter assigned to the Zeeland council, Zeeland school board, things like that. One of our weak points was township government. We just didn't cover as much township as we should.

JM: I remember when my father started with the North Holland Church in the '20s, many of these rural churches never even had a bulletin. So this must have been the only written source.

RVW: Right, exactly. Good point. That's what happened. But these people were very devout in the fact that they knew their deadlines were whatever day. Then sometimes in later years, they would get it to us on say a Tuesday, and maybe we wouldn't get it in until Friday or so. They would call, rightly so. We didn't put quite the priority on it as we should have in the later years. I certainly can remember that vividly.

JM: You know what I would like to do if we can, is to continue this chronological development of the newspapers. Then once in awhile perhaps we can suggest changes that took place because of technology. I asked about telegraph for example...

RVW: Fine. That's a nice introduction to the Frenchs. Mr. French was a successful businessman. He recognized that newspapers could be lucrative. He came from Monroe, Michigan. He owned the Monroe Evening News. He thought that western

Michigan could be extremely profitable, so he bought The Holland Sentinel. The Holland Sentinel, as I said, on July 21 the stock change was made. He thought that it was important for The Sentinel to expand its news coverage. So he was quick and one of the first in small dailies, to purchase a wire service. There are two wire services, and at that particular time they were much more competitive than they are today. The one he chose was the United Press. The reason he chose that was because he thought at that particular time, not only the price was good, but they had outstanding writers, many from the New York Times and that kind of thing. So he purchased the United Press Service. Just prior to World War II, or right about that same time, there was the International News Service. They weren't big enough, and the United Press was not as big as it had planned to be, because of another situation which was called the Associated Press. Now the Associated Press wasn't big in the '20s, but it became larger because it was a cooperative. So it meant that the rate that you paid was less, because you were in turn responsible for taking care of everything in your area. So that if something happened of the news nature, a fire or something, you had to report that to Detroit and then later Grand Rapids, depending as the Associated Press got bigger. But Mr. French didn't want to be a part of a cooperative. He wanted to belong to the United Press, so he remained a member of the United Press until the family sold in 1977. That was when the Holland paper then became a member of the Associated Press, because the company that purchased the paper belonged to both. But by that time, the United Press had lost so many subscribers that it just couldn't keep up with the technology of laser photos. With

the telephotos in the '50s, again, The Sentinel was a real forerunner. I don't think that the readers in Holland recognized the money that was being spent. The Sentinel was very profitable, and the French family was doing very well. But they were also willing to get the latest in mechanical equipment. We had the best linotype machines and speedy operators. Clean linotype machines, gave us good, clean reproduction on the pages. That metal was re-melted every day, and without a lot of dirt in the metal, you'll have better metal reproduction the following day. So this was a big thing. Then in the early '50s, came along what we called telephoto, which meant that the pictures were being sent by telephone lines. Again, The Sentinel was quick to be the first. We had it before The Grand Rapids Press did, because that would allow us to have pictures almost within the same day. You would be saying that something would happen in the morning in Washington, possibly by, depending on your deadline, you may have a picture by afternoon at that particular time, or certainly by the following morning. This was different because prior to that, we had had a matrix service, which meant that we subscribed to another news organization called Central Press. They sent mats overnight. They gave us pictures of what was going on in Washington, and now and then pictures that were occurring in other countries.

JM: You could make your own choice?

RVW: We could then choose. We got a series of them everyday. We'd get a cartoon for sports and pictures. If you look at The Holland Sentinel in the '20s, '30s and '40s, particularly on Saturdays, you'll see a whole full page, and people really liked that.

It would say "World News of the Week," and you would see everything from the Hollywood personalities, to the politicians, to the unusual scenes like the tallest man in the nation, or something like that. Those things all came over on little pieces of cardboard. When I started there, that is all we used. If somebody pitched a no-hitter, you hoped that you had his cardboard mat in the files so that you could quickly put it in that day. If he was a rookie, and you didn't have him, you had to wait three days. That is why, many times, as people look at The Sentinel today, of the '20s, '30s and '40s, they will see that there is no pictorial story, picture, on a major story, such as say that a ship has sunk off Newfoundland or something like that. You wouldn't get a picture of it. Or Lindbergh going to Paris, if we happened to have a file shot of Lindbergh, that was okay. If we didn't, or even later with Amelia Earhart, and all of these other things, you just had a lot of copy, and most of your pictures on your front page were what we called one column, head and shoulders. We also had a process of making engravings. So that we would get a picture of a person, a formal shot taken by a local photographer, of the mayor or the council, or whatever particularly would be used if we had a picture on file. You would then use that as an obituary or if the person made the news. Mr. Brooks, Earnest C. Brooks, was a well-known person in the community, being the mayor, owned an insurance agency. I was just looking up some material the other day on the Depression, because it was in October of 1929. Well, The Sentinel didn't run any pictures of that until Mr. Brooks, who was the mayor, made an announcement that the city was going to help the needy. So his picture is in on the front page

saying the mayor says this is how the council is going to help the needy. So that's what Mr. French did. In the '30s and '40s, he continued to do this. He had a son, J. D., John David French, who was going to be his heir--highly regarded by the family and by other newspaper people. Mr. French had an untimely death in the early '30s. I believe the cause was heart attack. So the heir of The Sentinel was gone. Mr. French had a daughter named Dorothy French who was a nurse, and she had been nursing in Lansing, and she met a gentleman by the name of W. A. Butler, Wilfred A. Butler. She married him on July 30, 1934. He had been working for a trucking company, but came to The Sentinel and was named the business manager. So he was replacing Mr. French, as I said, who had died. Mr. Charles A. French was still the publisher of the paper, and remained the publisher of the paper until he died in January of 1948. J. D. French was 38 years old when he died, so he was a young man, and figured that he would be the publisher of The Sentinel. Mr. Butler became the business manager, and then in 1948, when Mr. French died, Mr. Butler became not only the business manager, he became the editor and publisher. So that the masthead, as of that date in January 1948, carries his name, and carried his name, and only his name, until he sold the paper April 1, 1977.

JM: Can I interrupt at this point a moment?

RVW: Yes.

JM: Your father, of course, wrote for the paper.

RVW: Right.

JM: That was a free-lancing kind of thing obviously. Did he get involved in the actual

publication of the paper? Did that become his career, or did he stay in the teaching profession?

RVW: Thank you for asking that, John. My dad was so interested in newspaper work, that when he went away to Western Michigan, he wrote for the Kalamazoo Gazette, and then he wrote for The Sentinel. But he was strictly just a correspondent, just a writer for them. He was innovative enough, and being the type of personality he was, he would contact all of the papers. So that the Detroit papers, and there were several at that time, Chicago papers, there were several at that time, paid for his stories.

JM: He had a byline in all of these papers?

RVW: Not a byline, but well, he wrote under Vande in The Sentinel, which I thought was kind of interesting because we never bylined at The Sentinel. We didn't byline until 1977, and as I hinted a few moments ago, Mr. Butler opposed it. There were no bylines in The Sentinel, which is unfortunate to the degree that some people who maybe dug out a story should have been rewarded with it in the times between 1948 and 1977, but Mr. French felt the same way. Sports columns, starting in 1950, were bylined. My dad did get that Vande, and they put that on the sports stories. Another person who did get rare sports bylines, was Watson Spoelstra. Watson Spoelstra attended Hope College when Bud Hinga became the coach in 1930. He convinced Watty to go to Hope. Then Watty worked at The Sentinel, and convinced Mr. French that he should go to the Olympics in '32, in California, Los Angeles. He paid for it himself. Watty was a good friend of mine, so I know that story. Of

course, Watty then went on to the Associated Press, became sports editor of the Detroit News, and is a wonderful story in itself. But that was an example. Getting back to my dad, he wrote about himself when he was at Western Michigan. I didn't find this until late in the 1980s. My dad was still living, but having dementia, he was not able to communicate about it. I found some papers he had done in 1925. He was asked to write a term paper or some kind of an essay, on where he saw himself in twenty-five years. That would have been 1950. And he saw himself as the managing editor of a small daily. So that really was his dream. In looking back, I see now, because he took me to ball games in the '30s, he made sure I got in the press box, always had certain rules, in other words, you just sit there and don't talk and that kind of thing. But still he was introducing me to what turned out to be the early part of my vocation, sports writing. So he really directed me, I think with my mother's acceptance on that, directed me into this vocation.

JM: He himself was never in the vocation?

RVW: He never did it. No, what he did until he was 85, he covered the Holland City Council, which made him very unique, even though he lived in Zeeland until 1937, he covered the Holland Council from 1929 to 1985 when the Lakeshore Press moved and had its own bureau here. They somewhat abruptly told him that they didn't need his services any more. And that was difficult. Computers were in and he was a typewriter person. He didn't know how to work computers, and they said we're using computers now and so that was it. He was still articulate enough, his senses were such that he could still cover council meetings, and he knew a news

story. He was just a good news person.

JM: Now, we're in the Butler years. That must be about the time when you, well, the Butler years must have started when you were just finishing high school?

RVW: Yes, right.

JM: Tell us about that, how did you get into the business?

RVW: Thank you. I was the kid that hung around the back door. I was interested in sports. I happened to not have been an athlete as such. My dad, having been a coach had said early in my athletic interests, he said I think maybe you ought to try to write about them than play them. So yes, I did the typical. I played a little football in high school, and basketball, and that kind of thing, but not with any basic success. I did fairly well in track, which was something of an individual sport, so I was able to run longer and faster than a few of the others. So I did have that for my own ego in high school. I was able to get my varsity letters all three years, which was important, and also go to Hope and be on the cross country and track team. That was important too. During the war, I had quite a deep voice, and that helped me, because in 1942-'43, the men were all gone, and I took it upon myself, that The Grand Rapids Herald did not have a sports reporter in Holland. So I called The Grand Rapids Herald, and asked for the sports editor, and I think this was probably prompted by my dad, he was working for the press. He said, "Why don't you call the other paper?" and I did. This man by the name of Hieny Martin thought I was older, because he told me that later. He said, "Sure, you take care of the sports. You take care of Hope College, Holland High, and Holland Christian."

JM: How old were you?

RVW: I was thirteen. Of course it was simple to just go with my dad and report on the scores, and in basketball with Christian High, the high point men. You get about three or four paragraphs, or maybe three or four lines, depending on what it was. About the same time, well, a little later, about fifteen or sixteen years old, I was at The Sentinel and would hang around the back door hoping that the editor might want a reserve football game covered or something like that--which he did, and he knew me by name. He would say, "Well, you go cover the reserve football game." So I would write four or five paragraphs, and they usually would run that. About that same time, we had a lot of horse shows in Holland, and the social set was more prevalent than it is today. There was a certain social set who were socially acquainted with the owners of the paper and competed in the horse shows at Waukazoo and Castle Park. Those were resorts, and so the highlight of the summer would be to have a horse show. They would send "the kid" out there, because they didn't want to send a reporter out there to sit all day, to cover all these horse results. There would be about thirty events. They start in the morning with the kids, and then they would go until the hunters over the outside course. So I would end up writing all of those results, typing them, and then turning them in. They would usually run, when it was published, maybe two or three feet. I would get ten cents an inch. So I was getting two and three dollars. And I was also getting into the paper, and also on occasion the city editor would have a couple of suggestions on what would make the story better. I should have maybe led off with so and so's

horse, rather than playing it somewhat chronological like I had the tendency to do at that time. He would say maybe the hunters over the outside course, which maybe was the last event, but it was still the most spectacular, that kind of thing. So I learned that.

JM: Were you in high school at that time?

RVW: I was in high school. I was a sophomore.

JM: You had no electives in high school of course at that time.

RVW: We had a journalism course, but I couldn't take it until I was a senior.

JM: Oh I see. You had all of the stuff taught by the time.

RVW: I had a very good journalism teacher. His name was Peter Veltman. He went on to Wheaton College. I noticed his obituary in the paper less than a year ago. He went from Holland High School to Wheaton College.

JM: Did you spend your summers at the paper then too?

RVW: I did, but I'll tell you what happened. In '48, in July, WHTC went on the air. It went on July 31. I did some research for them this summer because they were 50 years old and they wanted to know all about that. Well, what happened, was that Mr. Butler in his own way, he was a clever business man, didn't want radio as a competitor, but he recognized that radio was here, just like his father-in-law did who used to run the baseball scores on the window, taking information off the radio. I have heard stories about how they would read about World Series scores. Incidentally, just to side-track, Mr. French did build The Sentinel building. He built that on West 8th Street in 1928. One of the first things he did was build the

building that is there now. And that was very important, because they moved The Sentinel which had been behind the Model Drugstore, above what was called the Owl Restaurant. He built this two-story building, and that was quite something to have that building there in 1928. I was told by the late Hero Bratt, that Nellie Churchford from the City Mission used to have her rallies there, and people would walk on down to Kollen Park for baptism. But that was a vacant lot that was then filled by The Sentinel Publishing Company, or The Sentinel Printing Company as they called themselves in 1928. But getting back to '48, when WHTC went on the air, Mr. Butler was one of the owners...

(end of side A, tape 1)

RVW: Okay, WHTC...Mr. Willard Wichers, Mr. Millard Westrate, Mr. I. H. Marsilje, Mr. Nelson Bosman, and Mr. P. T. Chef, owner of the Holland Furnace Company, came to Mr. Butler and talked to him about this radio station. Mr. Butler surprised him by opening his drawer, and there were some preliminary plans for a radio station that he had been keeping in his drawer. Well, they said, why don't you join us? So he did. So the plan was, that the six would own WHTC, they went on July 31, 1948. The plan was that the trade off would be that Mr. Butler who recognized radio, but didn't want to accept it as such, it's hard to understand in today's world, but anyway, he said, I will make a trade-off. We will give The Sentinel broadcast, so The Sentinel broadcasts will handle the local news, and those will be done three times a day. The trade-off will be that we will run the WHTC program log on page 2 everyday, telling about the radio station. In looking this up for research on 50

years of WHTC, there never appeared, with the exception of an announcement on the front page with a drawing, showing that there was going to be a station in Holland, just a brief story. But the other story when WHTC went on the air, they went on the air on a Saturday night at six o'clock. It wasn't until the following Wednesday on an inside page, page 5, where it said WHTC on the air, and in turn told who the announcers were. The plan was to have two people from The Sentinel, the editor and his number one assistant, do the radio broadcasts. And they did it for a few weeks. But this business of being there at 6:30 in the morning, 12:05 at noon, and 6:05 at night, meant that they had to run down to the radio station. I was just starting Hope College, in the fall, and it's about late August at that time. The station had been on about 4 weeks, and I had been around the paper and doing little odds and ends. That particular summer I had done a few things. We had a column called "Servicemen in the News" and I would interview people who returned from having served in the occupation force in Japan, or might have been in Europe, or whatever, World War II people who were returning who may have re-upped and then had returned. I was doing some sports things, so they decided to ask me, and this was just tremendous. I wanted to be a radio announcer, and they said we would like you to do the newscasts. So I started writing the newscasts, and then I would deliver them. I did all three, every day, Monday through Saturday.

JM: That was a pretty heavy assignment along with your college work.

RVW: Right, it was. But to me, it was very important to do. So I did it. I was doing that, I was going to school, but periodically the city editor, and if I may just digress

for a moment. I talked about track earlier, and for some reason, the city editor who had watched me run in Grand Rapids against the Grand Rapids city league teams and against the Kalamazoo and Muskegon teams, took a liking to my sports activities. So he was supportive there. By the same token, he thought, well, I'll help this young man, not only with the radio, but I'll also teach him how to do some writing. So this was something that I was not getting at the college other than I was taking a course from Dr. Edward Brand, who was a new instructor at the college in English composition. So combined with that and the city editor helping me and giving me real opportunities to do writing, why it worked okay. I was living at home, so as long as I kept the balance, I was doing okay at the college. So I continued to do that. Then it got to be 1949, and in 1950, I thought I was going to transfer to the University of Michigan or Michigan State to take journalism. But in the spring of 1950, the college elected me to be the editor of the Milestone. So I had to decide whether I wanted to do the Milestone. What would that give me in that kind of training? I again conferred with my parents, and felt that maybe this was the thing. I talked also to Bud Hinga who was important to me. At that particular time, Korea had occurred and I wanted to get into the service. I could have easily left in 1950. He talked me into staying in college, and the idea of the yearbook, which was a very, very tiring experience. My junior year of putting out the yearbook, nobody can know. You have a staff, and you have all of their pictures in the yearbook, but you end up doing ninety percent of the work, and they would be the first to say that. We had it published locally, so that I was really

basically working night and day. And then doing The Sentinel newscasts. I did do one thing...I would check with the police department, but oftentimes the newscast of the following morning would be very similar to the previous night, because if there hadn't been any breaking stories, I pretty much carried that, so I didn't have to write another broadcast. Then later, I think as I was a junior or senior at the college, they decided to go to a remote, so that meant that I could do the news right from The Sentinel office, so I didn't have to go break-neck across town. Sometimes I literally ran, most of the time I went in the car. I would come in there sometimes out of breath. It was just bad. You know when you're trying to do the news and you sound out of breath. So we went to the remote and that worked out real well. Then I did some with the Hope College Anchor. They wanted me to be the sports editor, so I did that for a semester. But I felt I could really learn more at the Holland paper. Well then, when I graduated I was offered a job to be a press aide for Gerald Ford, who was our congressman. Then again, I had a tough decision, but it wasn't that tough, because I was so determined to get in the service, my fraternity, classmates, and several of the people who I respected at the college, people like Russ DeVette were all from the service. I thought, well, I should get into the service. I had an automobile accident occur in the '40s, so I was 4F, and that really bothered me because I had tried to play football, and that kind of thing. So I did get into the service in 1952, but before I left, I had graduated in June, I started working full-time at The Sentinel, which Mr. Butler was receptive to that, to do the radio, and to do everything else that they wanted me to do. I did sports in

the morning, and then I did reporting and so forth later.

JM: If I can interrupt at this point, it seems to me that you were weaned on journalism, from the very beginning of your years.

RVW: Right, that's a good word, John. Journalism was a part of our life. My mother, everyday, and I was so used to this because she started, I spoke in Zeeland last week and they were talking about this, because my mother and father were really well liked in Zeeland. My mother, I can remember, she would every morning, call the mortuaries. Yntemas in Zeeland, and then the ones in Holland, and my uncle was the manager of Dykstras. She would call and get the obituaries, and then she would phone them into The Grand Rapids Press.

JM: So she was really a correspondent for The Grand Rapids Press.

RVW: Yes, she would call them, and my mother being my mother, she was such an excellent person. She had such wonderful diction, and she could spell so well. So that when she gave those words, and all of the business of the "I as in Ichabod" and "V as in Victory, " she got them correct. It is so important. I tried to tell my reporters over the years, you're putting a scrapbook out for somebody everyday, because you put in an obituary, they're going to cut it out. So it is so important that it is correct. So she did that, and also Dr Simon Blocker. She would call him every Thursday night, and he would give the seminary appointments for that following Sunday. I got to know words like McBain, and Moddersville, because every Thursday night, and Dr. Blocker, I had him for Senior Bible, was just a very humorous man. He had such a great outlook on life. He would visit on the

telephone with my mother and say so and so is going here and so and so is going there. And that kind of thing. She did that for years for the Grand Rapids paper, and she did it I think until they stopped not having it. I don't remember the year, but I know she did it way into her '70s or late '60s anyway. But then the paper started dropping certain things. Then just getting back to my particular activity...I started full-time for The Sentinel, and then I was given credit for those two years toward my retirement. I started there in June officially, and then in August I was in the service. Got in the service and took my basic training and one of my assignments during basic training was mopping the public information office floor. I got up enough nerve to say to a colonel, I've had a little experience in newspaper work on the outside, and didn't think again about it. And then I was assigned to Korea. I called home which was unusual when we did call home, and I told my parents that I would be home for seven days and then I would be shipping out. We had just suffered a big loss in Korea, so we were those replacements, we were told that. There were 120 of us. On the 23rd of December, I was told that I was not going home that I was to stay there. My orders then were given to me on Christmas Eve and they told it was a wonderful Christmas for me, providentially. I was assigned to the post newspaper.

JM: Had you been infantry?

RVW: We lost two fellas of my unit. Because of the holiday, I officially went to the post newspaper and was told that I was going to be the sports editor of the Fort Bliss News, which was a paper that we published 7,000 copies every week and it went to

the 21,000 men who were there, and some women too, but primarily the men on the post. I started as sports editor, and then I worked as features editor, and in the meantime the All-Army boxing tournament was held there. So I was picked to do the announcing of the All-Army boxing tournament over Armed Forces Radio Network, which was a great experience for me. I hadn't had much experience in pronouncing Spanish names, and there are a lot of Spanish people who are prizefighters, so I knew that was one of my downsides. It must have gone okay because I did all four nights. And also Metro-Goldwyn Mayer decided to send Richard Witmark and Karl Malden to Fort Bliss. I had been assigned in January and they came late in January, and since I was the newest member of the staff and didn't really have other assignments than sports, they said you're it. So I was assigned to them for six weeks, and I saw how movies are put together. All the love scenes were shot in Hollywood, but all the training scenes were done at Fort Bliss. I watched them everyday. It was really quite something. I wrote about them, and I also wrote for the El Paso paper because I was their contact with these actors who stayed downtown. It was a group of men, the two stars, and then others and they formed this little group of soldiers who were learning how to be soldiers. The name of the movie was Take the High Ground, which was never a big major movie. But anyway it was something. One thing led to another in the service, and I got to cover the Sun Bowl, I got to cover General Matthew Ridgeway coming back from Korea after the armistice, I got to cover just everything that went on.

JM: This was for Fort Bliss?

RVW: For the Fort Bliss News. We were in El Paso, Texas; it's a border town. When the armistice was signed, I still had another year and I wanted to go to Europe. So I tried to put in for that. Colonel Brandt said to me, as long as you make me look good, you aren't going anywhere. (laughter) So that's what happened. So I was discharged there.

JM: With that kind of a background, did you ever dream of having something bigger perhaps than The Holland Sentinel?

RVW: Yes, I did. So I came back in '54 and I knew my job was there. They had written me and said that you may come back. In that particular year, Hope was defending football champions and a lot of those kids who were playing were friends of mine. Al VanderBush was a friend, and I wanted to cover Hope. They didn't have a very good year that year, but anyway they were supposed to have had. But the ball didn't roll the right way. John Visser was the basketball coach because Russ DeVette, who was a good friend of mine, had gone to Maine, because he wanted to coach basketball there. But then in '55, yes, I did have that desire and so I went to California. I went to UCLA and took courses in journalism, photography, and in speech. Those were applied toward my masters. I came back. I was offered a job out there in Orange County. Not on the Orange County Register, but I was offered a job there, which would have led to the Orange County Register. Then I just decided I was coming back here. So I did, and then it was '56. Things went on and I was basically in charge of sports until 9:30, and then from 9:30 until noon I would work on whatever happened. I wasn't a chief reporter, but I was one they

would send out on whatever stories. I was still taking graduate courses because I still wanted to get my masters. I still was toying with the idea of maybe I'll teach journalism, I just didn't know what I was going to do. So I was at Grand Rapids Junior College taking courses from the University of Michigan. On April 3, 1956, that's when we had a tornado which took 18 lives. I never saw the sky so green, never before or since. But I'm looking out of the window on Boswick Avenue and seeing this early evening sky.

JM: I was speaking in Grandville at the time.

RVW: You were? Well, we were in a car pool with three other guys, and I forget who was driving that night, it wasn't me. We got to Hudsonville, and I said, "Fellas, I've got to leave." So I found my editor, and my other editor had been on vacation, I knew that, so I knew we were down a reporter. And so I went right to work. I went right to the firehouse and those bodies were coming in. We did that, that was a spot news thing. One of the first spot news type of things I had ever done. So that was '56. Then '57-'58, the excitement I think of '58-'59 Hope College got in the small college basketball tournament and defeated Wheaton, and then I got a byline. (laughter) I was down in Evansville, Indiana--Hope lost the game, but my editor gave me a byline. First byline on a story I ever had in The Sentinel.

JM: By the way, were you married at this time?

RVW: Yes, I married Virginia Boeve of Holland on January 21, 1956. She died July 21, 1981. We had one child, Nancy A., born [date removed], 1959. I married Mary Stam on August 12, 1982. She married Kenneth D. Stam on January 1, 1957. He died May

29, 1980. They had two children: Kathryn L., born [date removed], 1958, and Kenneth M., born [date removed], 1961. Mary's maiden name was DeKock. A native of Demotte, Indiana, Mary came to Holland in September, 1955, to attend Hope College.

From '56 to '59, I continued to do a variety of assignment, whatever came up in the newspaper. The editor who hired me left in the '50s, and then his successor left in the late '50s, about '58. Another gentleman, Al Bransdorfer, became the editor. Bransdorfer had been there since '52. I became assistant city editor. He was editor until '66, and of course '66 was already the start of the difficulties nationwide. He left to take a paper in Reed City, and I, in turn, took over as city editor. That was a very difficult time because Mr. Butler was determined that we would be covering the story as United Press reported the Vietnam story. I was a veteran and so I was very hawkish. As the years went by, it was difficult to work with him. Hope College was having some problems. They weren't problems, but there were students responding to...

JM: Demonstrations.

RVW: Yes. I've said this publicly, so I say it again on the tape. Hope College was putting out the best paper in town. George Arwady was the editor, he is now the publisher of the Kalamazoo Gazette. They had a fella by the name of Donia and they had a girl by the name of Eileen Verduin.

JM: Working on the Anchor?

RVW: Yes. Eileen Verduin, who now works at Steelcase. And her name is Raphael.

They were the three excellent writers. Excellent at putting the story across. I was having difficulty because people were saying to me, here are these kids walking up and down 8th Street with a flag upside down and putting grave stones in Windmill Island, and our coverage was so limited. First of all, I was having difficulty getting men because they were going to Vietnam. It was just a real difficult, difficult time. Floyd Brady, who was an outstanding basketball player, was being used by Dr. Calvin Vander Werf to be the liaison between the students and the community per se. He had to, at least, be the student person, so they were having meetings on his porch, and they were having other sessions in Centennial Park and that kind of thing. It was just a very troubling time. We didn't have strong reporters. I had one who was a veteran reporter, but she was interested in her particular beat, which was City Hall, the hospital, and school board. And also, digressing but very important, we were having more activity in townships because in the late '50s we had the start of the West Ottawa school district. That was a major time. We had annexation in '58 and '59. I wasn't the city editor, but I was responsible for trying to get some of that township coverage. We did a fair job, but by no means adequate job.

JM: How do you define the position of city editor?

RVW: City editor calls all the shots.

JM: I see. Publisher is the...

RVW: Publisher owns the paper, signs the check. Many times you leave his office and say, "You're the boss, but I'm right." I had difficulty convincing him that the

community was changing. There was a diversity that was much more prevalent later.

JM: You mentioned also the fact that you had been managing editor, is there a difference between managing editor and city editor?

RVW: Well, in the way we were set up in those days, there wasn't. City editor was the top job. In other words, if you wanted something in the paper or you wanted to criticize the paper, you called for the person in charge and you got me. The publisher, depending on who you were, answered some but for the most part I took all of the heat. On the other side, I took some of the compliments too. But working for that particular man who had his own philosophy on how a newspaper should be run, was a difficult time. In 1977 when the paper was sold to Stauffer Communications from Topeka, Kansas, it was kept from us. We had no idea the paper was being sold, and by we, I mean the production department and the editorial department. Because it was in April, I was planning to go on spring break and was told that I couldn't leave because the paper had been sold. I didn't hear that until 48 hours before...

JM: Would it be fair to say, with all due respect to the publisher, that you perhaps had a broader and more sophisticated journalism background than he did?

RVW: Yes. He was a businessman. He knew that if you had to sell something, whether it be a lawn mower or automobile or piece of clothing, he could get you in a classified ad because that is what you wanted to sell. But his philosophy was, in three or four words, get the money. In other words, he didn't care what you were selling; you

could be an advertiser for 50 years like Fris' and it wouldn't make any difference. Now there were contracts, in other words, he knew you were going to advertise every week. But I respected him. I knew he was the publisher and that was it. But he was strictly not a newspaper man. He could not write at all. So he depended on his reporters. If he wanted to make a point about an editorial which was seldom, but if he wanted to make a particular point, he would come in and say write about whatever we're...But he did not touch anything. We were fortunate at that time and I think it is very important to say that. Arnold Mulder was one of the Mulders of The City News and was a professor at Kalamazoo College. He wrote all of the editorials, and he did an excellent job including his famous Walls of Jericho editorial which he wrote in '59 about annexation. The important thing of annexing to the public school system was to get the additional acreage or millage. So we got that. Mr. Butler was 81 when he sold the paper.

JM: When the paper was sold, was that the first time that it achieved outside ownership?

RVW: Yes.

JM: This was a group of papers that...?

RVW: Yes. The Stauffer people owned 22 papers, 12 radio stations, 3 television stations. They owned the Kansas City Royals baseball network. They were big. They were giving big money to the University of Kansas for the journalism department. It was an entirely different operation. They sent a gentleman here by the name of Scoglund who had been on three or four papers. He too was not a writer and he was quick to say that. So he interviewed with me the first couple of days, and we established a

chemistry, thankfully, that he felt comfortable with me and the reverse was also true. He said I want an editorial every day. Tell me what you're going to write so that we know, in other words, what tact are you taking on abortion, or what tact...You know the community, you know what things can be said, what can't be said. So it was a very nice relationship. He said, at the same time, I want you to be what's called the managing editor. So that means that you will manage the newspaper. We'll bring in, or promote as we did, somebody to be the city editor, who would take care of the daily assignments, in other words, who's going to cover the council, who's going to cover the school board, and that kind of thing. He immediately said we need more reporters. The first thing he did to me was let me have three more reporters. So that put a reporter in Zeeland, put a reporter in the townships. It still didn't give us enough, but it gave us more than what we had under Mr. Butler.

JM: Did they have a resident also on staff? I mean was Skoglund...

RVW: Yes, he lived in Holland. So he took the place of Butler as far as the human figure was concerned?

RVW: Yes. He signed the checks, and everything went through him. In fact, the first big...which was fortunate for the paper, was the question of the seminary becoming a prison near the Saugatuck, St. Augustine Seminary. It was perfect. We were owned just a short time, and this became a real hot potato, so that we were getting lots of letters to the editor. He said to me, unlike Mr. Butler, run them all. We probably ran 98 percent of them. Some of them were off the wall. In previous

interviews, I've said that the thing I really accomplished, was letting the people have their say. The whole idea like Voltaire said, the whole business of "I will defend to the death your right to say it, even though I vehemently disagree with you." That was true in my case. I remember in recent years, being a member of the HEDCOR, and the HEDCOR people being so angry with me because I would run something from Paul Wabeke. They would say, well why do you run him? And I said, he has every right in the world to his opinion. I'd say, I'll defend to the death his right to say it, and I think that that's when this publisher stood behind me. I remember even we had some disagreements with Meijers. In other words, he was knowing that Meijer paid for the news room, and I knew that too, just as an example at that particular time.

JM: You're talking about Meijer, the retailer?

RVW: The biggest advertiser. They were spending probably \$500,000-600,000 to sell their goods to the public at the paper. That in turn was paying for the newsroom. But there were times when I would say if they were also being charged in federal court with a violation of something, that had to be reported. So there was a good relationship.

JM: So it was a fortuitous change of ownership then.

RVW: Yes, so that he recognized, come what may, the newspaper had its role in the community. So the people knew. But then we got into the early '80s. Going back into the '70s, I think is extremely important. We went from hot metal, the linotype thing, to cold, what we call cold type. And we went to the computer and we did it

cold turkey. They sent me to Boston to learn the system. I'm not a computer person. I'm still not a computer person, but I knew enough. Then I hired a young lady who came from another company. She was not journalistic at all, but she understood computers. I would tell her, and she in turn would teach the staff. But we had to make the change, and the production department had really the biggest change. They had to go from Saturday of putting it out in hot metal, to Monday, putting it out with a computer. We only missed it by a few hours. I think we were publishing by four o'clock. And at that time we were publishing a little after noon, two o'clock. But that was a major, major change. Thankfully it could be done under the new ownership. Mr. Butler had sent me to Milwaukee and Chicago, because he knew that we were going to have to change. He was 81 years old, and he also knew, which he didn't share with me, none of my business, he had three children who wanted nothing to do with the paper. All they wanted were the dividends, and they really didn't want to run the paper. They didn't want the small town anymore. They wanted to be in their respective locations which were around the country. His wife was getting older, and so they decided to sell. But he knew that we were going to have to make that change. I think the change was made much smoother with the new ownership, because they had already gone through that change with a few of their newspapers, and in fact the publisher they chose to send to Holland, had gone through it with his paper in Hannibal, Missouri, and also with a paper in Kansas. So that he knew the bugbears we were going to run into. He knew some of the dialogue that was going to be...the problems we have with

classified advertising...Of course, that's money, you have to make sure you get those classified ads. Those days were really long. We got the paper out, but there was always the next day of trying to get the people who called in that day to want to sell all of those classified ads, and then make sure we got them correct. There were some touch and go things where we, at times, the computer was new, our serial number was 20, so you could see that we had bought early. It was called Compugraphic.

JM: State of the art.

RVW: The bigger papers were Union, and they couldn't do it quite as quickly. In fact, we started publishing the Chicago Tribune in 1985, and I would go to the Tribune office on Michigan Avenue, in Chicago. The editors there would tell me, you can do more things with your paper than we can with ours, and here we are. They had certain limits as to how far their type could set. In other words, they could set type maybe 21 picas, and I could set it at any width I wanted. The Optical Association says that your eye can only take about so much, and then you have to go back. But I don't want to get into all of that technical stuff.

JM: You were talking about the era of change that took place when Stauffers took over the paper. You were talking about technological changes, and how you were...?

RVW: The big change came, as I say, we went from hot metal to cold type, or the computer. We did that in 1977. The first prototype for newspapers to go to computer was in 1974, so we were only three years behind what some papers had been doing. Because this was the Stauffer decision, and it was a wonderful

decision. The person that they had brought into Holland, we worked well together. He had the misfortune of contracting cancer. He died at 59, April 15, 1985. He was sick for about a year, so I actually ran the paper for about 18 months.

JM: Are you talking about Stauffer himself?

RVW: No, I'm talking about a fellow named Don Skoglund. His widow is still here, because she liked Holland. She stayed here. He was from Illinois. They were originally from Shawnee, Illinois. They had been at other papers because Stauffer had sent him around.

JM: Can I interrupt now to talk about the paper from a more human point of view? Content? By the '70s, you must have started running a lot of features, did you not? Like Ann Landers, things of that sort?

RVW: Well, we go back with Ann Landers. We were one of the first. We were running Abby VanBuren, and for some reason, Mr. Butler, who was not a newspaper person, he was a good business man, and he knew how to do certain things. He recognized or his wife did, either one, but together they recognized that we needed a lovelorn column. So we ran Abby VanBuren. We were one of the first to run her. Then, Ann Landers came to the Women's Literary Club, and this was way back in the late '50s. And we weren't running Ann Landers. So he quickly got on the telephone and got to the syndicate that ran Ann Landers, and said we're running Ann Landers. I use as an introduction to one of my talks, I always say that we were the only paper in the country at that time that ran both lovelorn columns. I always kid because I say maybe we had the most problems, I don't know. We dropped

Abby later and just ran Ann.

JM: This concept of syndicated features, when did that start? In the '20s? '30s?

RVW: It started about with Will Rogers. Will Rogers was a Broadway person who provided a little saying per day. You look at The Sentinel of the late '20s, and Will Rogers, his little pictures and drawing and his saying for the day. Mr. French bought those. He felt that that was important. Comics were introduced about the time of Mr. French. Comics are a hundred years old, but the comics of the late '20s, Cats & Jammer Kids, and They'll do it Every Time, he was buying those. He recognized the importance of a comic page, strictly being a comic page, something that would give you a smile. Then we ran the Dick Tracys and things like that in the '30s. The Sentinel did not run a horoscope because they felt the community, being of the type of community it was in the '50s and '60s, wouldn't really want a horoscope. But then, we got a lot of letters on it. We also took surveys periodically when Skoglund was there. One thing that doesn't get a lot of, that people don't give you a lot of support, but you don't dare not run it, is the crossword puzzle. We don't get a good readership on it, but the people who do it, do it. Same thing with bridge column. You don't want to leave that out. So we started running a horoscope in the late '70s. That still is there.

JM: Talking about the horoscope and comics, and so on, and knowing this community, particularly in the past, was the paper ever in trouble with the community because of this content? Was there ever questions raised about any comic strip content or was it so innocuous that even Holland, Michigan, wasn't shocked?

RVW: Well, yes and no. I think that the trouble with the comic strips came later with Doonesbury. The trouble with Doonesbury, from a technical sense, is that it's 37 picas. And you say, so what? But you can't run it on the comic page, because it won't fit. So it has to run on the editorial page, because under your contract with Doonesbury, which I detested--and Mike Lloyd from The Grand Rapids Press felt the same way, we talked about it at meetings--you are really boxed in, so Doonesbury ends up as an editorial on a editorial section, an opinion page. Some papers of recent years have put it other places. Some of the content of Doonesbury, there were a couple times I chose to not run it because I felt that it was offensive to my readers. So what am I doing? Am I playing God? That was a scary thing. I think it was a matter of profanity or innuendo that a couple of times I didn't run it, and we just put "Doonesbury is not here today because..." whatever. I was criticized, but by the same token, being criticized gave me the opportunity to run that person's opinion, as to why Doonesbury should run, so that John Jones had that opinion, which we didn't agree with. I guess we went so far as to say okay, you may come down and see the actual cartoon. But we did some "revolutionary things," for Holland when Stauffer came. I remember, one of the first things, the teachers were negotiating about withholding services, so they were going to be pink slipped. So we ran the type in pink, I mean, with pink ink. Of course, that's a catcher. That's an eye catcher that we needed at that time, to establish...this was Stauffer's choice. They wanted to, say, we're going to be part of the community. Their logo and motto was "Count the state lost if you don't do something for the

community." As I said, this prison thing really helped us. It gave us a front page editorial, where we stood on it, how we felt it should be a prison and so forth. So that gave people an opportunity to either agree or vehemently disagree. Then we got into the '80s, and I want to just mention in '85, Clay Stauffer, who is a son of the owner, his grandfather had founded the paper and the corporation by buying the Topeka paper. He was a good friend of William Allen Wright, of Emporia, Kansas, the grandfather. Clay decided to go with, and many papers did in the country, a user-reader friendly thing, which meant that you no longer were the smaller paper, and that you were still were small but you didn't run all of the police blotter kind of thing. I personally, having come from a small town background, found it the most difficult part of my job, ever, and the thing that gave me the most stress and the most headaches, was running things that basically were from the municipal court. Things that started out as felonies became misdemeanors because you got a smart attorney. People who got in trouble would come and tell me about it, and then threaten me in a variety of ways. The municipal court made great reading because we're all gossipers. I used to tell the police department too--we had our difficulties with the police department; each chief runs his own show--but I would say, you have two policemen, and one policeman can't wait to tell the other policeman. And that second policeman can't wait to tell his wife, and his wife can't wait to run to the back fence. Same thing with consistories. You know, you have elders that keep their mouths shut, and have elders that don't. You really get into problems. That's why I always sit, and Mary coming in on the backside of my career, used to say,

"You have 50 percent of people in town that don't like you, and it's a different 50 percent every day."

JM: But they all know you! (laughs)

RVW: Right. You're only as good as the pencil you push. In other words, am I being shown around at this new addition to Haworth because they want the ink, or is it because they want to know a reporter or whatever? And you get that, I'm sure. This whole business of reader friendly resulted in that we did more feature stories, and less of the hard news. We cut out accidents, if it wasn't a fatal, it didn't run. You could have a serious accident, and somebody would say I didn't see anything about that in the paper. That's exactly right. Thankfully, the person survived. But, and the whole business of death. We begin to just say everybody dies. We don't speculate whether it was a suicide, whether it was a murder. If it was a murder, it's probably going to be on the front page. But I say, everybody dies. We're then going to add to that, don't say in lieu of flowers. I noticed the other day when Harv Buter's brother died, it said, give to Hospice, or give to American Cancer, and those organizations appreciated that. But it was all part of the reader friendly. We don't want to get into...The controversy is fine about airports and assisted suicide, and all of that. That's our role in the community. You have to do that. But as far as Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Smith having an automobile accident or something, that is not done. And particularly not the court, because the court is a very sterile thing. It says you are guilty, so the newspaper says, John Jones guilty of and it will have an acronym for drunk driving, or whatever it is, or a sexual conduct, where in

Michigan, there are degrees of penetration and all that. It became very, very difficult. This publisher I had, Mr. Stauffer, this was his second paper. Very intelligent, certainly had been brought up in newspapering, a very good writer, and I respected him. He just made these decisions which said that we're not going to deal with those. The paper was sold again a few years ago. Now it's owned by the Morris Corporation, which is even bigger. The Morris Corporation owns the Flashes, and owns all of the publications that Meijers does.

JM: Isn't it true that in the last decade or two, there has been a vast change in the way news is purveyed? I don't mean only technologically, I mean in terms of content, blurring facts with entertainment?

RVW: Yes, that has come with all of your television. Television has made such a change. I noticed it even in the '60s, when we would have an accident or a murder or some news story where we could not announce it until the sheriff had been photographed pointing to the sight. He was waiting for TV, I used to kid. It's been said by my newspaper people, Film at 11. Because that is what the sheriff in every county, I don't care if it was Ottawa, Kent. and police chiefs all geared themselves, couldn't wait. And Al McGeehan and all the other mayors couldn't wait until that television personality came in here.

(end of side B, tape 1)

RVW: Clay Stauffer, who was 32, replaced Don Skoglund who had died, and the company must have made a decision to bring a family member into this particular paper. They had many other newspapers where they could have sent family members.

There were eleven grandchildren and they were all in either radio, television or in a newspaper. Clay Stauffer came from Glenwood Springs, Colorado, which had a circulation of about 7,500 and came to Holland. In addition to the Glenwood paper--I met him for the first time when he was about 28--he was running the cable for the Stauffer organization. Stauffer took a chance and thought that cable was going to really be big and they wanted to own it. So they thought we'll make a cable and the newspapers would be running the cable. And then do everything on cable. This didn't happen to take off. We had the Ted Turners and that kind of thing, CNN. But what they thought was that you could do every thing from the television. In other words you would buy your groceries and cars...The day may come, but as I say the cable that they envisioned would be that way. It would be a "telenewspaper."

JM: More akin to what Internet has become.

RVW: Right. Exactly. Thank you. It was going to be something that you would be using as your newspaper, only you would be having it on a screen. And Clay was a smart young man and he was going to head that up. That's when I met him. I went to Topeka and heard about how they were going to do this. Well, it just didn't take off. Not for any reason of Clay. It just didn't happen to go nationally. I know there were cable companies all over the country that were small and were trying to get this idea of everything will be done on the television. Well, it didn't go. So he came to Holland and he represented a family person. That meant that he could call (and I say this on the tape), he could call dad! In other words, each paper gets so

much a year. We would probably spend \$30,000-40,000 on columns. So I would decide now, what should Holland read? I felt in my limited experience, but yet I felt I knew the community. So in 1977, I bought columns that were George Will, David Broder who summers at Beaver Island (he gave us a nice package of Washington), James Kilpatrick who is another conservative, and we ran those for a while. Then I bought Andy Rooney and we were one of the first to buy Andy Rooney. Just to digress, I talked a little while ago about Ann Landers. When we bought Ann Landers she was so cheap because she did not have that many papers. Well, I had a vice-president who would check my costs each year. And those costs go up as you negotiate. But Ann Landers stayed ridiculously low because we started so low. He used to be almost angry with me. He'd say, "Well, how do you get Landers so cheap when these other papers are having to pay big bucks?" Well, the same thing. If somebody happened to take a chance on Charlie Schultz and picked up Peanuts back in 1950, you would have gotten it for nothing. Well, when the rest of us picked up Peanuts it was already expensive. Those people who write columns become very wealthy. Art Buchwald is another one we picked up early because I wanted a satirist and that kind of thing. Later in the early '80s, we picked up Ellen Goodman because I thought we should have somebody who was to the left and she was from Boston. Now I notice in recent years they've picked up Cal Thomas. Cal Thomas was basically mine. I had negotiated that and now they've picked up Molly Ivins and others. But that's strictly the managing editor's decision. What he thinks the community will hear, he or she, because we had a woman managing editor prior

to this one.

JM: I'm not trying to sum this up, but I would like to get other concepts across if we can take a few moments for that. I do want to bring us up to date, though. You said in 1995 the ownership changed. You were still employed at that time?

RVW: No, I wasn't. I left in 1989. The last thing that I was in charge of was the Sunday paper. We knew that this whole strip along US 31 was going to become what it is now. And the mall had only opened in 1987 but we were being told, and I was on HEDCOR, Holland Economic Development Corporation, which was very helpful to tell my publisher what was going to be happening in the community. I knew that these companies were going to be coming in here, maybe not right off the bat, but they would be coming. But Meijers of course was then a twenty-four hour operation. Others were coming in, ABC indicated that they were going to come. But with that, they said you have to have a Sunday paper or we will not advertise with you at all. So that's a question that's been asked me a lot. Particularly by people who really, like my mother, did not like a Sunday newspaper. She just did not like a Sunday newspaper.

JM: May I comment that way back in 1950s I served a church in Kalamazoo and the Sunday paper was perfectly acceptable.

RVW: The Gazette?

JM: Yes, in Kalamazoo. Also a Dutch community.

RVW: Right!

JM: It just depends on the people.

RVW: Of course, the whole Meijer thing. When they decided to be open on Sunday was in 1964. I was not city editor at that time, but we ran a double page (we called it a double truck when the two pagers are together) from the Holland Ministerial Association asking that Meijers not be open on Sunday. Editorially we stayed away from it which was typical Mr. Butler. Don't do that! We don't want to upset the advertisers. And so Meijers was open. The newspaper, philosophically, maybe didn't want to be publishing on Sunday because it meant getting a whole Sunday staff. It meant your whole business of more money for the newsroom. But on the other side, because of these companies coming in and the technology of today--like ABC Warehouse brings in a little disc of its whole ad and they can run it in two minutes. So the result is that you need very few composition people. I remember when Stauffer came in '77, the first couple of months (and it was very traumatic for us who regarded ourselves in the old Sentinel as a family) we let ten people go. I said "we," but I didn't have to let them go. But I felt in part that I had lost these friends who knew I was staying because I was in editorial, and editorial was gaining people because the company felt we needed more reportorial people to cover the community. The community was getting larger. The townships were being heard from. We needed somebody to tell about Park. We needed somebody to tell about Holland, Fillmore, Laketown. And we didn't have that before. So it was a different picture. But then the Sunday thing. We worked on that and I outlined all that and we decided what kind of features we would have. What we basically had before that was a weekender. Starting in '77, we published a paper on Saturday that

was a mini-Sunday paper. I had a girl who was very good at it. She worked hard on it, and we would have a feature story, we would have a business story, we would have what we called a "soft" feature, a "hard" feature. By "hard" feature it would be a look at a "why" type of piece, either locally or county-wide or whatever. That was our weekender that we published until '89, and then the Sunday paper started in '89. Although I did not edit the Sunday paper (I retired at that time), my retirement had nothing to do the fact that we got a Sunday paper.

JM: We're not getting into too much detail in terms of these various areas we want to cover. You retired in '89. You have no relationship with The Sentinel any more?

RVW: No.

JM: In other words, it's out of your hands. You have no tie. I would like to talk about a couple of other papers. First of all, The Holland City News. How long did that last?

RVW: The Holland City News lasted until 1977. Let me tell you what happened. In 1939, Mr. French talked to Mr. Mulder and said, "Let me buy the paper." Mr. Mulder was getting older and I really believe (and I've said this publicly at the cemetery too when we went by Ben Mulder's grave) that really affected his life. The newspaper was his world. Mr. French gave him the money. The money he couldn't refuse. But he had told him in the editorial on the front page in 1939 that Ben Mulder would be an integral part of the new Sentinel. But he wasn't. So he just kind of put him on the sidelines.

JM: Was The City News still a weekly at that time?

RVW: Yes, and it had it's own editorial policy. In other words, you had two "takes" at every incident. In other words, everything from covering a sermon to the robbing of the bank. You had two different "takes" because you had two people reporting just like you had with The Grand Rapids Herald and The Grand Rapids Press.

JM: What about the Zeeland Record? Here's this little paper...

RVW: That was the Van Koeverings. I always respected them. I thought George Van Koevering was an excellent editor. Corey. We had our differences professionally.

JM: But you must have dominated the area. The Zeeland Record is still a secondary paper with all due respect.

RVW: They are a weekly, and one of my first assignments full-time was to cover Zeeland.

JM: My guess is that many people took either The Holland City News and The Press or they took The Sentinel and The Press if they wanted really full coverage. Would that be right?

RVW: That would be true. However, The Press...they took it for other reasons. They got a better farm page. They got a better sports page. They were taking The Press because The Press wasn't doing as much with Holland. Now in 1985 when they decided to go to this satellite and go to this bureau, that was entirely different. Then they were publishing a paper right here, and that for me for four years was tremendous competition

JM: Oh, I must confess that I take The Lakeshore Press. And in another dimension, I read The Sentinel on the Internet. Now that's another factor to think about for the future. I have quite often wondered, why did The Sentinel go on the Internet,

except that every other paper seems to be doing it.

RVW: Yeah. And I think that that was a decision decided in Augusta, Georgia.

JM: It takes a little patience, of course, but then I'm not rustling the sheets either. But I follow The Sentinel. I like both papers. But I am impressed with what The Lakeshore Press is doing.

RVW: The Lakeshore Press has done a much better job of covering Holland. The thing that is the difference...

JM: They have the pulse a little bit closer.

RVW: Not only that, but they have the reporters. Most of the reporters at the Lakeshore started at The Sentinel. And I put up with that for years. Because anybody who was any good, works about so long. Then we started bylining in 1977, so The Press was aware of who was bylining. My dad was still working for The Press, but he was not the threat that some of these young Turks were. The Press would give them immediate benefits and would give them arrangements whereby they could make more money and have a definite period of time. They didn't have a lot of overtime and things like that. And they do a good job. The thing about The Press that I wanted to say, they can concentrate on those particular items that are current and of interest to you on that day. They don't have to worry about the total package. Their classifieds are taken care of, comparable to The Sentinel, the classified man at The Press was at The Sentinel for years. But they don't have to worry about the other parts that go into the paper of the columns and the editorial pages, and the comic pages. Those are all production things that you have to think

about, or social pages. The social things are handled in Grand Rapids, and that kind of thing. It's a different situation. They're running a little different operation than The Sentinel is. But on the other hand, I think, day in day out, you get it first in The Press, and then The Sentinel has to play catch up. One reason for that, in defense of The Sentinel, is the deadline time. The Sentinel now has chosen, which was not a surprise, they decided that they should go mornings, that advertisers wanted a morning paper. Again, the advertiser dictates that. That's not the publishers coming in, and saying, well, I have a whim today, let's publish in the morning.

JM: So for the record, it began as The Holland Daily Sentinel, became The Holland Evening Sentinel, and now The Holland Morning Sentinel, or maybe just The Holland Sentinel.

RVW: It's just The Holland Sentinel that gets published in the morning. I like a morning paper. I think it's fine. What do I look at first? At my age, I look at the obituaries.

JM: Has The Sentinel always been a profit making operation?

RVW: Very profit making, to my knowledge.

JM: So you see no evidence of its demise?

RVW: No, not at all. In fact, things that I am sad that aren't in The Sentinel anymore, that made it more of a local paper, just aren't in the paper. But by the same token, the community has become more cosmopolitan. People are accepting that okay, this is how much they can do with the world. This is how much they can do with the

nation. This is how much they can do with sports. We'll accept that, recognizing that they are limited as to their...newspapers still, regardless whether it's Holland, Grand Rapids, or New York, still run on a percentage. You don't run 70 percent news and 30 percent ads. You run basically 60-40. You never will see a Sentinel less than 20 pages. I was a part of that, because I was still in a regime where we figured out everyday, here's the column inches for advertising. That means we can do 'X' number inches for news. I was opposed to that, because of couple of times it came down to be a 16 page paper. And you run a 16 page paper in a city of our size, which is a printing area of 110,000, that's a pretty small paper. So one time, I wasn't trying to prove anything politically, it was just a decision I made which I regretted because of the telephone, we didn't run Ann Landers. Well, that switchboard just looked like a Christmas tree. By 4 o'clock, the publisher was on my neck, and saying, why didn't you run Ann Landers?

JM: It strikes me, however, that The Press tends to handle the same features as The Sentinel does. They both happen to have Ann Landers, don't they?

RVW: Yes, but you see that Ann Landers is handled in Grand Rapids. What happens here is that they send, everything is in pictures now too. You used to have to run up to Grand Rapids. They send everything right to Grand Rapids. And I would like to say, in The Sentinel too, is tremendously sophisticated. It is what we call pagination. Now I never did pagination. It's come on since I retired. I've gone to conferences where they've talked about it. What pagination is, on your computer, you have the whole page right in front of you. So that you're saying, I'm going to

write a story about John Maassen, right up here, I'm going to have a picture here of John Jacobson, I'm going to have a picture over here of Netanyahu, and you decide how that's all going to be. Now, that brings up a point. In the '80s, and starting in the '70s, we became a matter of content and design. Coming from a hot metal background, where I wanted to give you the reader as many as 25 stories on the front page, even if they were that long. I came from that background to having a publisher, such as Mr. Skoglund, coming to me in 1977, and saying, "Randy, I only want 10 stories on the front page, or 6, depending on those stories." Well then you get in with this whole business of what we call jumps. In that how many stories do you jump inside, what pages do you leave for jump pages and all of that. But it was a whole matter of how does the paper look, particularly above the fold. You're putting out two papers, above the fold and below the fold. You have to have the anchor on the bottom of the page and all that. But I began to say, and I said this to the people who I was working for, we are now basically a vendor paper. Our paper, 20,000, probably 18,000, are delivered. So regardless of what we do with it, it's going to be purchased anyway. But that argument didn't really fly. It was the idea of let's run a big picture on the front page. You see a lot of kids on the front page. And then we went to color. And in those mid-'80s, because Clay was there, and I preferred he talk to his father. Well, let me just pursue that a bit. We would apply for things that we felt we needed to make our paper better the next year. We would say we need 'X' number of dollars for this and that and the other things. Some things would be accepted, and some things, it's like anything, you put in a

wish list. It's a laundry list, but you are hoping that they will take two thirds of them, or maybe, well. With Clay being a family thing, even though he got permission to do certain things, he was able to cut through some of that, and he was able to say we have a paper down the street that's doing this and this and this. And they had a better press. So we went to offset. We put in a new press and we're offset, which made our reproduction better, the pictures are better. The other thing was, we went to color. We always used to refer to it as the red barn and the yellow school bus, because everybody knows the yellow school bus, and because everybody knows the red barn. We got a computer, and we got that long before The Press did. Our color was so much better than the Press. But as you say, you buy the paper for other reasons, and you don't really care how yellow the school bus is if you want to read about the school bus accident.

JM: I want to get into some less technical things now. The first question has to do with controversy in Holland. I've asked that of a number of people, and surprisingly, a few people can remember major controversies. It would seem to me, however, from your position, there must have been some events or some attitudes that really aroused a great deal of controversy in the city. Can you cite one, two, or three?

RVW: Yes, I think in 1967, we had never had teachers withhold services. The Michigan Education Association decided, because it was an extremely strong lead, they were having less success with the AFL and CIO. The automobile workers had their contract. So they chose to go to the schools. In 1967, they said we're going to pick two cities that are extremely different. We're going to pick Saginaw, which is a

blue collar industrial town, and we're going to pick Holland, which doesn't have any oil on the floor. By that, we mean we pick industries in this community, Lifesavers, and all our furniture companies, and boats. They don't have oil on the floor. We don't have a General Motors, and that's what Holland always said, we don't want oil on the floor. And so, the result was, here we were faced with these teachers withholding their services, and they didn't want me to say "strike." So here are my teachers who I respected in high school sitting in the front row out at Leisure Acres, which was the Holland Furnace grounds, saying we're not teaching today. This was a major controversy. These teachers basically wanted to be in the classrooms. Many of them were embarrassed. Ted Boeve and Nona Penna who were good friends of mine, we all went to the same church, were in charge. They were being told by their attorneys what they could do, what they could not do. Don Ihrman who was a good friend of mine, and also a good friend of Ted's and Nona's, on the other side of the coin. So this was a major controversy. And we had three of those. We had one in 1979...

JM: All centered about the education?

RVW: Well, contracts. In 1967 when the thing was finally settled, the teachers, and this was set up in Lansing and in Detroit, and Saginaw and Holland would be the examples, and then the rest would follow. Teachers were making major wage concessions. Teachers were not making a lot of money, and then Michigan, of course, went from being in the middle of the 50, went up to about 6. And then in '79, the same thing happened. At that particular time, Don had been superintendent

for years, so he was familiar with it. I had an excellent reporter, a girl who had a lot of savvy, a lot of writing ability, and she didn't back down to anybody. So she didn't just take a press release and run it. She really tried to get to the bottom of it. We were criticized by both sides.

JM: Was that a controversy pretty much expressed in the public paper, or was it in other ways as well?

RVW: The controversy, yes. Basically I think that we knew what we could get from the two parties was expressed as best we could.

JM: There weren't demonstrations or anything?

RVW: No, well, yes, the teachers walked in front of junior high. And of course junior high is the administration building now. They walked in front of every school. So people were going by expressing themselves. That was a major controversy. And then that is probably enough on the teachers. Another one was building a swimming pool. In 1962, Holland High School had built a new school. We had West Ottawa, which had built a pool. Holland High wanted a pool at their school. Holland Christian knew that they would be building a new school in the next three or four years, which turned out to be about 1967. Well Holland Christian said no way will we approve a school pool at Holland High. So that was controversial. So the compromise was, well we've got this athletic field down on Maple and 22nd. Will you vote for our pool if you in turn can use the pool, it will be a city pool. The Christian school officials said yes, we'll go along with that. But we won't ever vote for a pool to be next to that big, round fieldhouse where it was supposed to go

originally.

JM: Was this controversy based on the need or perceived lack of need, or was it a matter of location? Did the community buy the idea or didn't they like the...

RVW: The community bought the idea of having a pool, and I think depending on who you talk to...we knew we had a pool and I think the location, the best way was to say okay, we'll put it on a neutral site. I think that summed it up. And of course the whole business of Holland High School. The building of Holland High School and making it an open campus like that was extremely controversial because it cost the superintendent his job. It cost a few others their jobs too because it was so revolutionary. West Ottawa had built a junior high and a senior high, or a middle school, as they called it correctly. And they seemed to get more for their dollar than what Holland did. That was another controversy. Then we have had several strikes here, and I think the last and worst strike that we had in the public eye was in 1980. That was a strike between BASF and its employees when the goons came in here from Detroit. It was the first time that I ever saw brass knuckles. I was brought over to a motel which is now Best Western, and I was ushered into a room and saw these goons, and they scared me, there was no question about it. They wanted to know why I had written XY and Z. And the same thing was true of the other people who were representing the company. They were giving us releases. But it was a difficult time because we were the mouthpiece, some would say we were the mouthpiece for the company. And that's what the Teamsters said. But then to get something from the Teamsters was so difficult. The only way I could

get it was to go to this motel and then see what they would say and hopefully write it correctly. The company had men, who didn't have loaded rifles, standing on the roofs. The other thing that entered into it, which was something that I am going to say very tactfully, the police had a way of always arriving just about 20 minutes too late. I had the feeling that they didn't want to get into the skirmishes. But I couldn't say that.

JM: I would like to make this comment, and then I would like to get back to your own personal life especially these recent years. I have been quite surprised, and I shouldn't be surprised I suppose, but having lived away from Holland for so long, to discover what big news the church is in the papers. I'm startled to think that on the front page of The Grand Rapids Press you could have a headline which talks about the CRC, and everybody supposedly understands that the CRC is the Christian Reformed Church. That just blows my mind. I came from Orange County, and Chicago, and so on. That is still a unique thing here in this community. And I don't know if the church has quite the impact on the press that it once had, but it must have always been a matter to take into account.

RVW: It definitely was with me. Of course being Reformed and knowing that the CRC was the Christian Reformed, everything from the church page to the front page, and I think it was important always and I made more of it then some of the present editors are, however, in the recent years depending on the subject. With the CRC meeting at Calvin, it is nearby, and the RCA goes all over the country. But in recent years they have arranged to make sure there is a report filed everyday. Dr.

Elton Eeingenburg used to do it for us years ago. He would give his spin on things and then we would just give him credit according to that route. And so the RCA knew what he was doing.

JM: Of course the situation is quite different. For one thing there was a strong animosity in regard to Christian schools. I think the Christian school movement has become quite respectable in this community, from the Reformed church point of view.

RVW: In recent years, the wire services too have been interested in the ordination of women. Things that are going to...like the Southern Baptist and all the submitting, all on the front page of the New York Times because it becomes a new story because of what it is. And the whole Rhem thing, of course, made news.

JM: Getting back to Randy Vande Water. You have spent your whole life interpreting and channeling the news, but you are also known for your historical interest. You have written a number of books. When did you write your first book?

RVW: Actually in 1992, I was asked to do a picture book. This got me started. The Sentinel commissioned this, and this is all pictures and they sold it and they printed 1,300 copies. When they were gone they were gone. I was disappointed that they didn't print more. I learned a lot about putting out a book; I had never done that before. So I thought I would like to maybe do something in the future. In 1993, I met Ken Showers from WHTC, and I was interested in doing some little vignettes that could go on the radio. My sports interests, I thought why don't I do them at half time and talk about the Albion/Hope game of 1930 or something like that. He didn't particularly buy that, but he said why don't you do these little vignettes. So I

did. We talked on a Monday, and by Friday I was on the air with no sponsor. I told a couple of ship disasters. The following week I told a bank robbery. People started to pick up and say that they liked those. I did them for about six months or so. He was receptive to the whole thing, and then people started to call me. I didn't want to be mercenary, but I said to Mary, maybe I ought to put these in a book. And so I put them in a book. In the first book there were 30 or something. But they were all stories that I regarded as newsworthy, like the tornado, and Nixon being in Holland. I tied them to dates, in other words, when Nixon died, I wrote that story. The tornado was in April, so I told it in April. When there was a sea disaster that occurred in November, I told that story, or the Alpena when it sank in October, I told it in October. Or our medal of honor winners. And then I also thought well with my sports interest I always would like to have some sports stories. So I thought I'll call it Happenings, and then I wanted to get Heros, which would always give me a possibility for all kinds of heros or heroines. Then the sports would be the Hot Shots. I wanted to talk about Jim Kaat the baseball pitcher, I wanted to talk about pitcher George Zuverink, I wanted to talk about our independent baseball teams and things that were all part of Holland history, and so I did the first one and it sold very well. It surprised me. I kept telling these stories on the radio, and by that time Ken had left the station, but his successor got a sponsor, and that was then required that there be a sponsor. It has always been sponsored by Versendaal.

JM: How many of the Hero and Hot Shot series have you got?

RVW: I have four. I got the first two, this was '94, '95. And then '96, I knew we were going to have the Sesquicentennial, so I spent the extra money and put a decal on the cover. This came out in the winter of '96 and then this came out in '97, and by that time, I was advertising the idea that I would have 150 stories for 150 years. Prior to that, my first book after this, came in 1993, and that one was a co-authorship with Don Van Reken. Ted Cheff died in December of '92. Don and I met on the corner of 12th, right in front of Dimnent Chapel. Don said why don't we do the furnace company and do it straight away. Not any of the hanky panky which all of us had heard. Don had moved to Holland in 1965 after having been in Nigeria for many years. He had been doing these local stories about the Getz Farm and things like that. I didn't know Don very well, except I knew every time he wanted to put out a book, he came to me and asked permission to use things from The Sentinel. It was just a matter of signing a disclaimer that allowed him to use anything. So I knew him that way. So we did this book. Talked to Mrs. Cheff, the widow of Mr. Cheff. We didn't want her to sue us, so we went out to talk to her a couple of times. Then I went out a couple of times because I wanted to find out, again my sports interest, about when he, he being Ted Chef, was having the prizefighter Marciano train here. I also wanted to do a story on the boat crash that killed the two heirs from the furnace company because my mother's cousin was one of those people killed--there were 4 killed, the heirs and then two others. I had heard that story all my life. Every time I went in a boat, she reminded me of that story. We did that in '93. Then we did a book in '95 when the Holland American

Legion Band was 70 years old. Those are the two that we did together.

JM: Elton Bruins once mentioned facetiously that '97 was the year of the Sesquicentennial, and every 25 years a person who has a hobby in local history comes to life again. That must have been your big year! (laughs)

RVW: Yeah, right, and when I saw that I smiled because it is true. One of the girls, Julie Hoogland, who is the bureau manager of the Lakeshore edition of The Grand Rapids Press, did a piece on me a couple of years ago and she headlined it "the fellow who finds the quirky things." Because I've always said that Elton and Bob Swierenga are the scholars. I mean there is the big book that Bob did, The Netherlanders in America. And then Elton is doing this treatise for Pete Huizenga which will be hundreds and hundreds of pages I'm sure when he gets it finished. I thought that I would just concentrate on this kind of thing. So I've done the quirky things. But, I've always been interested in history. I did well in history. But, when you are putting out a daily everyday, and you know you're not going home until the paper is out, it was a matter of putting out that daily. But thankfully I was given somewhat of a memory in that I photographed every page, for some reason I could remember within a period of weeks, we ran that story in March, so I was able to, you know, check these things out. But I also made a rule, didn't say it publicly, but I also made a rule that these stories had to be about 50 years old before they qualified. But now with the '94, '95 coming up with D-day and VE/VJ day, I wanted to tell those stories because I lived those, and I remembered some things plus I knew I could get the microfilm or the actual papers.

JM: You talked about your interest in paper and ink which has been all encompassing. Are you a member of any other organizations? You are probably a member of some historical societies.

RVW: I guess the last couple of years since Mary retired I chose to not doing much of anything. I am the elder at the church and I do pastoral calls at Christ Memorial. Because of the size of the church, they have broken that church down into, I have 15 families. So tomorrow night I'll be calling on a family. They are just from all over. That family is north of Borculo. Mary goes with me. We made five calls last week, and I want that done by the end of the week. But I am no longer a member of the museum board, because under the rules of the bylaws, I served my time.

JM: You were there during some critical years. That's an entirely different subject, but we'll get into it.

RVW: I retired in '89, and I was retired about five minutes and Dale Van Lente said, "Would you come on our board for fundraising?" I don't regard myself as a fundraiser, but I did that. One thing led to another, so from '89 to '97, I was on the museum board. As the plaque says up there, I was on the Holland HEDCOR, Holland Economic Development Corporation. I was on that from '72 to '90. My dad ran the Chamber of Commerce from 1946-1965. After he left the Bureau of Social Aid, and then he was in unemployment and I mean he worked in MESC, and then he worked as personnel manager for Holland Hitch during the war because he was just too old for World War II. Then he became head of the Chamber of

Commerce which started HEDCOR. So I was familiar with that. At one time I was president of all the historical associations. It was funny. I was president of Larry's Historical Society, I was president of the Historical Cultural Commission. I think there were three or four. It was during my retirement years--Mary was still teaching--so I did that. But, it wasn't until about '92 that I really sat the seat of my pants down on the chair and started writing, it was more a conglomeration. My dad had saved everything. My mother, thankfully, had saved a lot of pictures that were not just snapshots. They were pictures like ballooning in Holland in her scrapbook.

JM: And you do have a memory. I am impressed by the fact that you could tell me exactly the day and the year when so-and-so retired or this and that happened.

RVW: Well thankfully I do have that. And that has been so important in my work, as I said, when you're looking up microfilm. I can say to Lori, give me 1930. And so that is helpful.

JM: I hope it eases up a little bit for you, I'm sure you had a wonderful ride through the Sesquicentennial, but...

RVW: Just to answer this, this is not what I was going to say but it's prompted by what you said. The newspaper calls me all the time. There was a call today. I don't know why because the girl just said I am so and so, but she didn't say call me back. It was on our service, but she didn't say call me back. And then I get a call from The Press, particularly when people die, like Chuck the Barber last week. I wrote a column on Chuck and so I just dictated them a couple paragraphs which they took verbatim. But they will call me to get a spin. I don't know if they'll call me about

the airport. I worked very closely..when Gordon Van Wylen and others decided that this would be a non-tax dollar thing for the airport. But we covered that extensively. I remember sitting in those meetings. And going back to the '50s and why I feel close to the fair. I don't care for fairs at all, but I was assigned to cover the first meeting which resulted in the rejuvenation of the fair. So that when the Ottawa County Fair, out across from the airport, I was at the first meeting. So now it has been going on for forty years, so I felt a part of that because I covered it. I covered the state park meetings when they wanted to do different things at the state park. When the cottage associations were saying to the state park we want this oval made a certain way. So I lived some of those things.

JM: Starting as young as you did, you had a long, long period. You're still young. You have a long time ahead of you I'm sure...

(end of side A, tape two)

JM: We covered a lot of territory this afternoon. An that's partly because you began so early in your life and partly because it has been your total absorption. I've seen things change from molten lead to the Internet. It's an incredible thing. One more thing I did not mention and I'll just make a brief comment about it, and that is the fact that now The Sentinel does put out a Spanish language, not a feature but a Spanish...

RVW: They don't anymore. They stopped it. One percent of the readers are Spanish, and they couldn't get advertising for it. But I just want to say, it's tooting my own horn, but being on those national committees and so forth and so on, allowed me to

get to be officers in Michigan press in the national press which got me to know these other editors. And also got us into competition, and I'm looking up there because I was...you don't know what a newspaper does in a community and you're supposed to sometimes, I read someplace years ago where we are supposed to, sometimes we were criticized, rightly so, for hitting or striking the wounded. But the one award that I have up there was because I felt that we should have the walking patrolmen again. We had it when I was younger and so the city council, much to the disgust of Chief Charles Lindstrom, started to go with the local patrolmen who check the doors of the stores and things like that. And I won an award for that.

JM: Where was the award from?

RVW: The Associated Press. I had a lady say this to me more than once, our misfortune is your fortune. I remember Mary will never forget it because she was not that involved in newspapering. One Thanksgiving morning there was a plane crash. Four people from Holland killed. I spent the whole day doing that story, running around getting pictures out of the church directories and this kind of thing. Then having Susan Geha come on at six o'clock and read my stuff. That's life, but I say because we are both members of the Associated Press, she is reading, but I got an award for that because you know it was kind of what they say meritorious or whatever, it doesn't make any difference. But the idea was that I spent the whole day busy because you don't know when the news is going to be made.

JM: This has been a fascinating afternoon. I think it's the longest one I've had.

Although we did take a break.

RVW: I appreciate you coming, John.

JM: You have been an eyewitness to a lot of history, and I gather from what you have been telling me, that you've also brought a new perspective to Holland. Because Holland as I remember it from my youth was pretty isolated. Pretty provincial. You were blessed to be able to have a great experience in the service, and to go to California and get some learning, and be in touch with a lot of influential people. And we are all benefiting from it. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

RVW: No I don't think so, I really appreciate you. I had no idea we would spend three hours, but...

JM: Since we are looking at pictures, I think we'll bring this interview to a close.