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## Van Wylen, Gordon Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interview with  
Gordon Van Wylen

Conducted November 15, 1996  
by Duane Booi

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Interview with Gordon Van Wylen  
Conducted by Duane Booi, 11/15/96  
Transcribed by Kristin Clark

DB: Dr. Van Wylen, you have been in a prominent and influential position in this community, so it's important that the record contain a little about your personal history and experiences and their effect on your work here. So, will you tell us, where were you born and raised?

GVW: I was born in the agricultural community of Grant, Michigan, but when I was two years old, my parents moved to Grand Rapids. My father had learned the building business and he decided that building offered better prospects than farming and so I, in effect, grew up in Grand Rapids. In the south east end. I had an older sister and a younger brother and sister and so we always had a nice life together, but I sometimes tell people I grew up in the lean years of the Depression when there weren't many dollars around and we learned the value of them very early. I graduated from Ottawa Hills High School in 1937. I might just mention that I have two memories of Holland before graduation from high school. One was, I presume, in the late twenties when my parents would take me to visit the Getz Farm on Lakewood Blvd. on Lake Michigan. I still remember the curved mirrors and standing in front of them observing a rather distorted image of myself. The other was that I played in the Ottawa Hills High School Marching Band and I remember that, at least in 1935 & 1936, coming to Holland for Tulip Time and marching in the band contest at Riverview Park. Then the parade down 8th St. So, those are my first and earliest memories of Holland. When I graduated from high school, I decided to pursue an engineering program and I went to Calvin College and

Michigan on this 3-2 plan where you'd go 3 years to a liberal arts college and 2 years to engineering school. Then you'd actually get a bachelor's degree from both of them. So, you'd have an A.B. degree and an engineering degree. So, I graduated from Michigan in 1942.

DB: Let's get back to your younger years. You mentioned siblings, you had two sisters and a brother?

GVW: Right, one older sister and then a younger sister and a younger brother.

DB: What games did you play back then? Being in the Depression, did you have to make a lot of your own toys?

GVW: Yes, the Depression started in 1930. In 1930 I was 10 years old. At that time my dad was doing well in the building business. I remember we'd built a new house in 1929. So, we moved to it and it was for us quite a nice house. Today it would be a modest house. Then shortly after moved in, it reminds me of today when everybody thinks the golden economic era's going to continue, and the building business was very flat. Almost non-existent for all of those years. So, those were somewhat difficult times for us economically, but I don't really remember being aware of the economic hardships we faced. They weren't unhappy times. I do remember that when things picked up a little bit, one of the big things was we could go out as a family and each have a double-dip ice cream cone for a nickel, so for 30 cents we had a family treat. Again, you know, visits with family and friends were fun times, and overall I really look at those as good years.

DB: They weren't so bad that you had to put cardboard in the soles of your shoes?

GVW: No, but we did buy the kind you pasted on. So, those were good years, and I might mention that I grew up in a Christian Reformed Church and I did go to the Christian schools through the ninth grade. But then, those were the Depression years and I went to the public high school. Frankly, I've always been grateful for both experiences.

DB: What activities were you involved with?

GVW: Well, I was in the band and I always tried to do athletics, but I was never quite good enough to make the team. But I did enjoy sports and I enjoyed studying and reading. I think I did a lot of reading over those years.

DB: What activities did kids do for fun? Did you go out on dates at that time in high school?

GVW: I started in high school, yes. I can just remember the first date. We had rather an old car, so I used the old car and it broke down that night.

DB: Likely story! (laughter)

GVW: Nonetheless, I think it was the sports. I used to do a lot of ice skating. In the winters we'd go out to the park and ice skate. My friends would go all sorts of places on our bikes, to the airport. I got interested in flying in those days, which I never have done as a pilot. My families took some vacations, although it was a little bit harder in the Depression years to have money for vacations. Overall, we just made our own fun because we didn't spend much money.

DB: I know that there was a group called the Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship and that and your relationship with the church, how did all that work out?

GVW: As I said, I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and I went to Christian school, public high school, then Calvin for three years and the University of Michigan. It was at the University of Michigan that I became acquainted with Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship. And that was really a good thing for me because I was somehow looking for a broader perspective on the Christian faith than the one I was brought up with. Not that I was reacting against it. I remember, in Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship at the University of Michigan, meeting Christian students from a lot of different backgrounds and finding it great to have this kind of Christian fellowship, but also broadening my perspectives on the Christian faith. Overall, that was a very good experience for me. I think what I really found in the Inner varsity Christian Fellowship were people who had what I would say was a very genuine faith, but they, in a sense, were comfortable in the world. You know, if you grow in the Christian Reformed Church and go to Christian schools, you tend to be isolated from the world. To be able to see people from all different cultural backgrounds who have a strong faith was a very fine experience for me. I had something of the same experience in high school, but much more so at the University of Michigan. It gave me a much broader perspective of the Christian faith and I think it deepened me in the faith. Also broadened me in that sense. So that was a very, very good experience for me. My wife, Margaret, also had a very good experience with the Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship when she was at Duke University. She didn't have quite as strong a religious background and so she, I would say, grew very strong in her Christian faith at Duke through the Inter

Varsity. We actually met through the Inter Varsity group at the University of Michigan in 1946 when I came back from the service and she was beginning medical school. Later on I was on the board, I was actually chairman of the board of Inter Varsity in the 1950's for a period. So, that was a great spiritual experience.

DB: Now that you've mentioned Margaret, could you talk for a minute about your family before we go on to anything else?

GVW: As I said, I met Margaret in the summer of 1946. I'd just been back from the service the semester before that in the spring of 1946 at the University of Michigan to start a master's degree program. I met Margaret in the summer of 1946 and I was kind of attracted to her, but she was a freshman in medical school and planned to be a medical missionary and I wasn't quite sure how you pursued this. Furthermore, I had agreed to teach that following year at Pennsylvania State University. This with a master's degree. So, it was actually nine months between our first and second dates. Then we began seeing each other and after I taught at Penn State for two years I was really convinced I wanted an academic career. So, I decided to go to MIT and get a doctorate. Margaret was due to graduate from medical school in 1950. We were planning to be married right after her graduation and she was going to do an internship in Boston while I finished my thesis at MIT. But two months before our planned wedding date, I came home to pick her up in Ann Arbor for spring vacation and make the final plans for the wedding. When I arrived from Boston to see her and take her home to Grand Haven, she was in the

student Health Service. When I came into the Health Service, the nurse said, "I want to see you first before you go see her. She has TB. So, she'll be in the hospital for a while." Actually, she ended up being in the University Hospital sixteen months, where they have a very conservative treatment. Actually, I have always admired her for this. The first eleven months were complete bed rest. Then, gradually, when things were stabilized, she'd get up first for five minutes a day for a week and then ten minutes. When she had two and a half hours a day out of bed, she could go home. I hurried up and finished my thesis a semester early and started teaching at the University of Michigan while she was in the University Hospital in Ann Arbor. But then we got married when she had five hours a day out of bed. We began living in Ann Arbor and she did go back and do the last two months of medical school, so in 1952 she had her medical degree. Then we decided we should have children, and recouping from TB and having children was enough without practicing medicine. So, she put aside medicine for those years. We ended up with five children, finally. She went back into medicine after we came to Hope College. She had an MD, but had never interned. When she first met Donald Walshenbach, who's a graduate of Hope College, and was head of Butterworth Hospital, he said, "Let me talk to someone, maybe we could arrange something at Butterworth Hospital." So, she talked to Dr. Morehead, and he arranged for her to start a one day a week internship and they were very good to her and simply said that when she had completed 360 days, she would complete her internship. In the summer sometimes she'd do a week when the kids were home



from school, but it took her about four years to do that one year internship. After that, she finished her residency in psychiatry through Michigan State and Pine Rest. When she was in her early fifties she started practicing medicine as a psychiatrist.

DB: She never became a medical missionary, but accomplished a lot nevertheless. Probably, chronologically, we're about up to your service time.

GVW: When I graduated from Michigan in 1942, I did take a job with Dupont. I wasn't really very satisfied with that job and the war was on, so I joined what was called the V-7 program. You could get commission as Ensign in four months. I did this in New York City on an old battleship mired in the Hudson River mud at 137th St. We were part of a larger midshipman's program at Columbia University. We really didn't have any choice of where we were going to be sent after finishing midshipman school, except you could volunteer for submarine duty. Actually, only engineering students were accepted into submarine duty. I didn't want to go to any more Navy schools, and I was ready to have an experience at sea, so I signed up for submarines and I was accepted. I went to submarine school in New Loudn, and then was assigned to this new submarine, the Hardhead, being built in Manatawas, Wisconsin. We had our shake down in Lake Michigan, and then went down the Mississippi River. To do this they put the submarine in a floating dry dock and a tug boat pushed us down to New Orleans, which is a very fascinating trip just to go down the Mississippi River on the deck of a submarine. We needed the tugboat because we didn't have the maneuverability to make the sharp turns. In New Orleans, we came out of the dry dock and went on our own down the Mississippi,

through the Panama Canal out to Pearl Harbor, and then I left on a first war patrol out of Pearl Harbor. We made it on the east side of the Philippines and that's where the story in the book, Encounter at Sea took place. Then we went to Perth West, Australia, which was our base. So, after that, we'd come up through the Indian Ocean and through Lombok Straits and the Java Sea and patrol around the Philippines or the French Indochina and the Java Sea. I made six war patrols. We'd just finished our sixth war patrol and we were in Subic Bay in the Philippines when the war ended and then I came back to the States shortly after that. I was in a total of three years. I guess I was involved with submarines for about two of those years. So, it was a very fascinating experience. I learned a lot. Before this I had never given an order to anyone, or had really taken charge. In the submarine, as the officer of the deck, which we stood in regular watches, and at your battle stations, you have certain responsibilities. I learned a great deal about responsibility and paying attention to details, which were so important. That really shaped my future career a great deal. You served between your freshman and sophomore years, so you know what it's like, too.

DB: Yes, I enlisted at seventeen.

GVW: Is that right? So you know what that's like.

DB: I was petty officer, but I know that in your position, there's a lot of responsibility when you have the lives of however many were on the submarine. We're about up to the time of your career, aren't we?

GVW: As I said, I really took this job at Michigan when I finished at MIT because

Margaret was in the hospital. I enjoyed Michigan and I was perfectly happy with that. When I started out, I really didn't expect to do anything but teach and do research. I didn't have any administrative aspirations. That's what I was doing and the subject I wanted to teach, and which I enjoyed teaching, was thermodynamics. I had a very fine professor at MIT named Joseph Keenan, who had a very rigorous approach. I remember trying to read his book when I was teaching at Penn State, not really comprehending it. Then, when I took his courses, I really understood what his approach was, but he was a very abstract thinker. When I started teaching at Michigan, I wasn't very happy with the text books that were available because they weren't rigorous enough, Keenan's book was too abstract for students, so I started writing some notes which were the same as Keenan's approach, but in ways which were more teachable to undergraduates. So, then some publishers got interested in those notes and then around 1955 I signed a contract with John Wiley and Sons to produce a textbook for them. I remember working very diligently in the evenings. At that time we had had four children quite close together, actually in four and a half years. Margaret was still trying to take it easy from TB, so Margaret would go to bed early, and the kids would go to bed early, and I'd go upstairs and work for two or three hours on that textbook. That book was first published in 1958. It just kind of hit the market when people were looking for something more rigorous than most books, and yet more teachable than Keenan's book. The book really took off almost immediately. Later on, one of my former students would join the faculty, Richard Sontag, so subsequent editions were co-

authored with Richard Sontag. Now, believe it or not, my former student is in his low sixties, and the book is still in publication, so he has added a third co-author. It's almost forty years later and the book is still being used. It's been translated into a number of foreign languages and just recently, I got both the Korean and a Chinese version. As I said, I didn't intend to do anything other than teach and research, but in 1958, I was in the Mechanical Engineering Department at the University of Michigan. I was asked to become the department chairman, which I did. That was about a half-time administrative position. We had 30 or 35 faculty members in the department. I enjoyed doing that and I still taught one course and had some graduate students. In 1965, I became Dean of the College of Engineering. My appointment was not the result of a great search process. The previous Dean was going to retire on June 30. They had interviewed people all year, but for some reason nothing had worked out, and actually the Dean died a few months before he was going to retire and over that summer of 1965, there was an acting Dean. Everyone wondered who was going to be the new Dean. In August, we went off on vacation up into Canada, and I came back a week before fall classes were supposed to start. When I went into the office on Monday morning, my secretary said, "The Vice President of Academic Affairs wants to see you at eleven o'clock this morning." So, I went in to see him and he said, "We'd like you to be the Dean and we'd like you to start tomorrow." So, it was just one of those things. I started as Dean the next day and I did that for 7 years until I came to Hope. I remember that when I had the first interview with Hope College in the fall of 1971,

I met with some committee, and they said to me, "Just tell us of a little bit of what you've done." And I was just thinking aloud and I said, "Well, I was a regular faculty member for seven years at Michigan and then I was the department chairman for seven years and now I'm in my seventh year as Dean." Someone said, "The cycle is right and it's a sacred number." I wasn't looking to leave Michigan. We'd more or less thought we'd spend the rest of our lives in Ann Arbor. Our house had been too small for our five children, so we'd built a new house a couple years before that, in which we were going to live the rest of our life. Then Hope approached me and we had to do some real soul searching as to whether we wanted to leave. Our oldest daughter was a freshman in college, but our next one was a junior in high school. So, we thought of making this move, and we tried to make it a family decision. About the first of December of 1971, the search committee said, "We'd like to recommend to the board that you become President of Hope College, but we'd like to know that you'll accept it if you're invited." So, I said, "I'll let you know at the end of December." That whole month we talked back and forth, and I remember one Saturday we came over to Holland so the kids could see it. I was really undecided what to do. December 31 was on a Friday, I remember it well. I hadn't made up my mind. I had said the end of the month, but I kind of assumed that New Year's Day was coming and I'd try to decide over that weekend. But on six o'clock New Year's Eve, Bill Wichers, who was the Secretary of the Board, called me and said, "You said you'd let us know by the end of the month." Here it was New Year's Eve! I said, "I really

haven't decided yet, but I'll call you Monday morning and give you a definite decision." So, over the weekend I said to Margaret, "Let the kids go to school and I'll stay home Monday mornig and we'll have to decide." The kids went to school that Monday morning and we still were vacillating. Finally at ten o'clock I had an appointment and I said to Margaret, "You know, I can't decide today." So, I called Bill and I said, "I'll let you know Wednesday." On Wednesday, I just called and said, "OK, if I'm invited, I'll come." That was a wonderful decision and a great decision for our family. In that fall of 1971, Roger Heyns, who grew up in Holland, and had served as Vice President of Academic Affairs at Michigan, and Chancellor at Berkeley during the student protest days, was back in Ann Arbor. I thought, "I'd like to know what Roger Heinz would say. He knows about Hope College. He had his freshman year at Hope." So I called him up and said, "This is what I'm wrestling with." He came over to the office and we talked for a while and he said, "It's a great thing to get a new challenge in your late forties, early fifties. I think this would be great challenge for you and I think you ought to think seriously about it." That whole idea of getting a new challenge in your late forties, early fifties when the opportunity comes is really a wonderful thing. That comment really persuaded me to come.

DB: That's great. Not having done so, it might have gotten stale for you. I wanted to make mention of your book. I originally read your book as a freshman in college. It's important to refer to your book, Vision for a Christian College, which was published in 1988, and to incorporate it by reference into this record. It says so

much about you and how your leadership inspired and challenged Hope College during your fifteen years as President. We'll come back to how things changed at Hope and Holland. But chronologically, having gone through that, after your presidency, you retired at Hope. Then you've had many ventures after that. I guess I would call that post-retirement work that you've done with Freedom Village and other ventures. I'm sure that's a very interesting part of your life.

GVW: I was due to retire on June 30 of 1987, and about three months before that I was asked to attend a meeting which was called by Dale Van Lente, who was President of HEDCOR to deal with a certain problem. About three or four years before that, there was discussion of where a mall was going to be located in the area. Up to that time there was not a mall in the area and our downtown had some department stores. There was one developer who thought he could put a mall in the downtown area. He had to be assured that the land would be available. So, HEDCOR had bought about a million dollars worth of property in downtown Holland that this developer said he needed. Then when he tried to get tenants, he couldn't get the kind of tenants he needed, so he dropped the project. Well, HEDCOR had bought this property and was now stuck with it in downtown Holland; they had a loan for over half a million dollars from the bank at one and a half over prime. You know what prime was in the mid-eighties. So, the question Dale Vanheute brought to this group, which included the presidents of the local banks, (I was asked to represent Hope College) and people like Ed Prince and Dick Haworth, was, "How do we turn this land we've got into an asset?" I still remember we would meet every other

Thursday afternoon from four to five, but no one was doing any staff work. So, we weren't getting very far. When June 30 came and I retired I said to Tom Wolterink, who was one of the group, and who'd been a vice president for the facilities of Herman Miller, "Let's give half-time for three months and try to do the staff work which we need to move this project forward." So, we did and Ed Prince gave us a place to work and some money to work with. We started developing a vision for downtown and we retained a faculty member I knew from the University of Michigan, William Johnson who is a brilliant land use planner, and he did some work for us. That's where this whole vision for downtown started. After three months we were just nicely started, and I continued this effort on a part time basis, and that's how I really got involved in this effort. I wasn't a plan of mine to get involved. But I got quite interested in cities and urban issues and how you make good living environments. That's been my retirement activity.

DB: So, it's that work that resulted in the renovation of the downtown area.

GVW: Exactly.

DB: All new store fronts.

GVW: There were other players, too, particularly the Mainstreet Committee. I did the staff work, along with Tom Wolterint, and later Greg Holcombe, for this group of businessmen, who provided some finances for us. For me, it's been partially volunteer and partially compensation. It's been very rewarding just to see what's happened downtown and now my interest has broadened out to the Central City area and to a broader perspective of this rapid growth we have. How do we preserve the



quality of life we have?

DB: Was part of the property that HEDCOR had also where Freedom Village is now located?

GVW: They had some of the lots in there. One of our key ideas for downtown was to have residential life. Out of that, through Bill Vanderbilt from Hope College, and then Ed Prince got sold on it. Freedom Village came into being downtown. That was one important step to bringing residential life to the downtown area.

DB: And HEDCOR ultimately got their money back out of it.

GVW: HEDCOR got their money back out of it, so we helped HEDCOR out.

DB: Individual businesses were putting money in the pot that ultimately helped to pay HEDCOR off?

GVW: Right. What we did was we formed what we called the Riverview Development Limited Partnership. People invested money in this Partnership, which really was organized for profit. However, we simply told investors, we'll use your money for a period of time (and we're still using it). We hope you'll get your principle back, but we're not sure we can pay you any interest. We'll use it in the best interest of downtown. So, the Curtis Center came out of this project, the building at the corner of College and 7th. The red brick building. We built that building as a first class-A office building downtown. It was interesting when we said, "What's our vision for downtown? We want good retail, good offices, good restaurants, strong residential life, good public spaces, and even could have nearby business. We think that will make a prosperous downtown." So, we built the Curtis Center as the first

class-A office building. Later 100 East building was built. Then, gradually, after the mall was built, the department stores left, but, gradually, other stores came in, such as Baas men's store and so on. Then restaurants came in. I remember Til Midnight and 8th Street Grill and 84 East and Alpen Rose. Ed Prince played a major role in this and now, in the last few years, almost all the second floors, which were largely vacant after the lawyers and doctors moved out, are almost all residences now. So, all of this has contributed to it and everybody now is excited about our downtown plus our snow melt system, which took a lot of push to get through.

DB: Did it? Who would not have wanted it?

GVW: Right. Isn't it great? Now that the downtown is doing well, we have turned our thoughts to the larger area. With this rapid growth you can't think just in terms of the city, you've got to think in terms of the whole area. We've been promoting things like this. Another area I have a great interest in now is the Central City, the area of older homes around Hope College. How do you keep that from going downhill? We've been working behind the scenes on some of these things. It's part of my community involvement. We glorify ourselves a little bit, by saying we're local thinktanks. We try to think of the ideas and then sell them. Not that we're not implementers, but we try to get people to focus on things that will really make a difference.

DB: Briefly, you know the future for the area, but in the time you've known Holland, how has it really changed? In compassion, in churches and so forth. What feeling

do you have about Holland?

GVW: Well, one observation. When I was growing up I always thought of Holland as a very conservative place, as I did in 1972, when I came to Holland. However, when you get older you get a little more conservative and Holland had gotten more liberal. There was a nice meeting place and we have really enjoyed our time in Holland. There are strengths of communities and certainly there is a lot of strength in Holland. I think one of the great strengths of Holland is the way the Christian faith has shaped the culture and the attitudes, and that really impressed us when we came to Holland. I always remember in the summer of 1972, just after we got here, we'd come from Ann Arbor where the student protests were strong and the students in those days didn't care about the community really. Trash and things like that, neatness. I remember, that first summer, being on 8th St. and seeing an elderly lady pick up a candy wrapper where somebody had dropped it and put it in a trash can. I said, "Now I know I've moved from Ann Arbor to Holland." When I think of that kind of thing, people do take pride in their community here, and it's a place of great trust. One of the things I was always amused at at Hope College was you'd get faculty members coming from out of town and telling about a few of their early experiences of this level of trust. I remember one of them telling me they bought a house and they went in some store to rent a floor buffer. They said to the clerk, "How much deposit do you want?" He said, "Just take it and when you're finished, bring it back and pay for it." It made such an impression on them that in Holland they trusted you to take it and bring it back.

DB: To some extent that's still true.

GVW: It's changed, but there's still quite a bit of that. Another one told me about when they were in a furniture store just after they had just moved in, and were having some relatives come. They wanted to rent a roll away bed. They were explaining this to the clerk in the store and he said, "You only need it for a couple of nights? Well, then you can borrow it." After I came to Hope, there was a professor that I'd met when he was a student at MIT, he was a professor at NYU I believe, but he contacted me. He said, "I just wanted you to know my story of Hope College." This was probably the late 40's. He was from Iraq and he'd met a Reformed Church missionary who arranged for him, a Jewish boy, to come to Hope. So, he took his freshman year at Hope College. He wanted me to know this story about Holland. The first week he was here, he was downtown and he wanted to take a taxi back to the dorm. He had bought some things. In Iraq I guess the taxis had black license plates and the other cars white. So, a car came up with a black license plate which happened to be a Michigan license plate, so he opened the back door thinking it was a taxi. He said, "Take me to Hope College." So the fellow said, "OK, but I've just got to run into the store a minute and get something." He said, "Well, hurry." The fellow came back and drove him to Hope College and when he got out, he was going to pay him and he said, "You don't owe me anything!" This is how he realized it wasn't a taxi. Isn't that a great story of Hope College and Holland and a bit of the spirit? Those are some of things that are nice stories and tell you something about Hope College. About Holland, Michigan.

DB: You said to a great extent, a lot of those things that were true twenty years ago are still true in that regard. Many things have changed, you can't leave your car doors unlocked at night.

GVW: What I really believe is the great challenge for the community of Holland is on the one hand, to keep those Christian roots really vital and strong in people's lives. But then to develop a community which is open and accepting, and you apply those values which come out of the Christian faith to the community at large. I think that two things, keeping the roots strong and yet not becoming narrowly focused, but use the faith to be creative in thinking and accepting of others, can make the kind of community that has diversity in it, but it does have sense of unity. What I really believe is that around the country, communities are looking for that. I believe that Holland can be something of a model. I think it's going to be because of those Christian roots with the faith lived out in the society at large.

DB: Exactly. I'm sure there are many examples of that in Holland. In Third Reformed Church, one example is taking in St. Francis's congregation which really baffled them. It's been great for both congregations to get to know each other. You mentioned before about some of the areas that are deteriorating in Holland at the south of the college. What is a broad view over the next decade for the city of Holland in that area and maybe in others, what do you see happening?

GVW: A comment by way of background on that because I think it's a very crucial issue. In fact, as the downtown was revitalized, and everybody accepts this, then you just look at that area around downtown, and if that doesn't stay as a healthy, viable

neighborhood, not only downtown, but the whole community is going to suffer.

Three or four years ago, Greg Holcombe and I promoted the City and Hope College led conference at Hope College in which everybody involved in that Central City area, public schools and public agencies and so on, came together and each one took ten or fifteen minutes to say what they were doing and the idea was, what do we really need to do in addition to everything that's being done? That was where I learned the wonderful things Van Raalte school is doing in their neighborhood for example. It's great program they have there. What we focused on at that conference was what were the key successes to revive downtown? One of the important things we had was a public/private partnership. The public focus involved the City and the Mainstreet Committee, which had functioned before we came downtown, were very effective. Greg Robinson, who is now Associate City Manager, was the head of the Mainstreet. He had an office downtown. He was really the ombudsmanman for downtown. Even though he was a city employee, he made sure that the city and all the merchants were working well together. Then Ed Prince and our group, the Riverview group, came in on the private side. So, the success of that was a good public/private partnership. We said what kind of public private partnership could we have in the central city? We said what we think we need is something like a Greg Robinson, who is a city employee, but works and has an office in the Central City.

(begin side 2)

GVW: So, out of this we developed the concept of this Our Street program, which is a city

program, and a very competent young lady by the name of Sue Harder runs it. Out of this you may have read a little bit about the paint blitzes they've done. They've paved driveways and they're doing landscaping now. They wanted some private dollars to complement that. Greg Holcombe and I developed what we called Homecor. We raised some money so that we can help people own homes and do repairs. Our focus is keeping the neighborhood strong. What we would like to do is if there is a run down rental property, help some family buy it and fix it up so it becomes home ownership. There are other organizations like Habitat for Humanity and Community Action House and H.O.M.E. They have somewhat broader missions. But I believe that you can have a central city that is still a good place to live, especially for young couples starting out. One of the interesting things these days is that there's what is called a new urbanism. Some people are saying that in suburban development you ought to have the houses close together, you ought to have sidewalks and then have open spaces rather than everyone having a one or two acre lawn. When you stop and think about it, that's what we've already got in the central city. If you can develop a good sense of neighborhoods, and there is a neighborhood watch program, and if people work together, we can make that a viable living community. That's what kind of excites me about this possibility.

DB: It's great that something is actively being done and thought about and not waiting until it's too late to do something.

GVW: Working downtown, Greg and I have come up with two conclusions. One is it's so much easier to address problems before they become bad. That's what we did

downtown. We didn't have to wait until the stores were boarded up. In that transition period, everybody worked on it and we addressed it. I see that central city is the same way. It's not a bad area, but it needs attention. I think if we work on it now we can keep that as a vital area. That's our goal. One of the other things we learned working downtown--there's no silver bullet. You like to think that there are one or two things that, if you do this, all of the problems are going to resolve. Our classic example is the Renaissance Center in Detroit. They thought it was going to solve all their problems. Rather, it's a whole lot of little things, working together, that make progress in a complex social structure. There aren't just one or two magical things you can do to solve all the problems. One other thing to remember, you're never quite done.

DB: Let's hope that you keep active in this with the rest of the group and make sure that that part of the city does not fall apart. The Area Center, that's another big thing in our future. Do you think it really is in our future? Is it really going to happen?

GVW: Well, it was interesting, just yesterday I was going through a file and I found a letter I wrote to the city manager, the mayor, probably the city council, in January of 1988. I suggested that what we work together on is to build a new sports arena on the foundry side on Fairbanks Avenue, and that we remodel the present Civic Center for a performing arts center. We're still wrestling with that question. This is a case where I have some convictions on it, but I don't think we're on the right track. I hope we can finally get on what we agree is the right track. This is my vision, the three things we're talking about are a sports arena, but it also has a sort



of exhibition area, two sheets of ice for hockey, and a performing arts center. If you take those all together, just the footprints of those buildings would be equal to about four football fields goal post to goal post. If you try to shoe horn all of this into that foundry site and the street department site, I think it's too much on one site. I don't think the GE site is the right one, either. This is my vision, that you put the sports arena where the foundry is and the street department is. It's close to Hope College, it's close to the athletic field. Then put the ice arenas behind VerHage's auto dealer. That's not much of an area. If you would visualize coming in from the east, you could have two nice buildings, one would be a sports arena, the other would be an ice arena. And you'd have a wonderful entrance to the city. Close enough so that staff could go back and forth between the two. Then I think the performing arts center, and I'm not sure we're quite ready for it yet, it's a big undertaking. But I think there are other places for it. One of them could be what we call the town park or the Window on the Waterfront Park, right at the foot of College Ave. I could visualize that right there would be a nice performing arts center. That would be my vision as to how to do this. What I would do is focus first on the sports facility, do the hockey arena at the same time, and I think I'd hold off a little bit on the performing arts center so you don't bite off too much at one time. As the community goes, we'd get a little more feeling just what the need is and what we want to achieve in the performing arts center. We've got Dimnent, and now we have some fairly large churches that could be used. The high schools have pretty good auditoriums. I think that we could do pretty well for short term.

I'd really love to see a good performing arts center, but I think if we would follow the plan, you'd eliminate a real eye sore as you come into the city where the foundry is. The other side of 8th Street is not much, either. That's my vision. I have told people this.

DB: Are you within the group now that has your ear for this?

GVW: I'm not officially in this. I've never been in the group itself that's working on it.

DB: Are you asked for advice or are you in a position where you can get a word in?

GVW: I don't think now is the time, but I think there may be a time. I'm waiting for the right time. So often when you want to change the direction of something, the timing of when you present an idea is so important. I'm not sure the timing is right yet.

DB: The time will come. Well, we've covered a lot of things.

GVW: There is something that might be of interest for this tape and this is the relationship between Hope College and the community during the years I was there. I think that the interactions between the college and the community have always been really a wonderful relationship. In a lot of college towns there are strains between the college and the community. It's not that there are not some tensions, particularly where Hope College students live in the communities, but overall we've had wonderful relationships with the community. I think it's really a very genuine symbiotic relationship for the college in terms of its support and participation in various ways. When I say the city, I mean the city government in the formal sense and the citizens in the informal way. I think the college also contributes a great

deal to the community in terms of cultural events, athletic events, volunteers from the college. I think that's been a very healthy relationship. I remember a couple of times in particular when the college played a kind of strategic role. I remember in particular was when there was discussion of building the stadium, the new municipal stadium where it is over on Fairbanks and 16th. At that time, there was this federal program called the Economic Development Corporation. They had funds for communities. So, it appeared that some funds could be available. The stadium had been the old Riverview stadium down on the waterfront, which is a marginal facility at best. There was general agreement that the city would apply for \$500,000 for this grant, which it got. When they developed the plans, they were more expensive. I think at the college there had been some funds committed. I believe the college decided to contribute \$25,000 to this. I think the bids came in at \$800,000 or \$900,000. There was a question of should we just let all this go? I remember Lou Hallacy was the mayor and we talked together and I said, "Let's see if we can't raise some private money." So, I remember we had a kind of emergency meeting on Saturday morning and before that I called the members of the Executive Committee at Hope College and told them about this and said, "I'd like the college to commit \$100,000 in addition to the \$25,000 to do this." They backed me up and so I went to that meeting and said, "If the rest of that money's available, the college will put in \$100,000 more into this." So, that was just enough to make it go and I think they got a little more money from EDC and that was how we got the stadium where it is. The Executive Committee said, "Sure, we'll put in \$100,000," though

I wasn't sure where it was going to come from. That was a strategic moment.

Another interesting interaction we had with the city was in 1980. We wanted to close 12th St. You know, 12th St. ran through the campus from College to Columbia. We had the idea that closing that would make it much more of a campus. We talked this over with the city. Lou Hallacy said, "I think this is the time we should push for this." He was for it. We went to the City Council and proposed this. Closing streets is hard to do. So, what they voted for by a 5 to 4 vote was to have a trial period for just one year when they just put up barriers at the end to see how it would work. We got that through by one vote. At the end of the year everybody liked it at the college, so we went back to make it permanent. We presented a plan for roughly the way it is now. There was a public hearing and there were some residents in the area on East 12th St who were opposed to it. But we got it through by a 5 to 4 vote. Then the city attorney looked up the rules and said for this decision, we needed a two thirds vote. So, we had to go back once again and get another public hearing. Again, I remember some students said, "We'd like to go up and testify at this public hearing." So, they told how nice this was the year it was closed, how nice it was they could walk across that street and not worry about traffic. Then an elderly gentleman got up and said, "You've been at Hope for two years. I've lived on East 12th St. for fifty years. I'd like to go down 12th St. I object to closing it!" We really talked to all four of those councilmen who voted no and finally one agreed to change his vote and we got it 6 to 3 and that's how 12th St. got closed. Now, I think everybody thinks it's just

great.

DB: I'm sure the people on East 12th St. don't notice going around to 13th. What a boon to the college.

GVW: So, that's a little incident I remember of interaction with the city. There was one other thing. The Tulip City Airport had been privately owned and then Ed Prince had bought it. But Ed felt that it shouldn't be in private hands, it should be in public hands. There was a lot of tension in the city over this. Somehow or other someone had got a referendum through that the city would not spend any money on the airport. So there was lots of tension. I was busy at the college and didn't get involved in the community, but someone said, "Would you chair a committee to look into this?" So, I took this project on in 1982 or '83 and I learned a lot about airports and how they're funded. It's very interesting that 90% of the funds to purchase and put in a longer runway that they now have would come from the federal government from taxes collected from aviation fuel and your passenger tax. So, 90% comes from the federal government, 5% comes from the state, so you only had a 5% local. But, here was this decision that had been made and by the vote of the people that no city money should go in that. So, we got commitments from private sources for that 5%. Then with that commitment we had to have a referendum for the city to buy it. That was my first effort, I kind of led this first effort. It was the first time I got involved, but the result is Tulip City Airport the way it is today.

DB: It took a lot of educating of the public before they went to the polls on that. It

wasn't costing them any money.

GVW: The amazing thing is now, without any city money being spent on it, we now have our own 7 or 8 million dollar airport. So, that was a little community involvement I had.

DB: I bet those things are fun. How about Windmill Island? Do you think that's a viable thing, that's it's going to go, they're going to build homes?

GVW: My colleague, Greg Holcombe, has been retained by the city to do staff work on this. You've seen the general plan they've developed for this and over the last two months, Greg and Phil Meyer, who is the City Planner, have met with about 25 families that expressed some interest in living there. Just to find out what their expectations are, the kind of house they feel they'd need. Many want to bring over old, Dutch houses, but they'd still have to be livable at the dawn of the next century, the next millennium. So, they've gotten a lot of encouragement. Six or eight people have expressed interest in having business on the island. I think there is a real potential for this to go. It's a big project and there's a lot of infrastructure to be built. But I think it has some real possibilities.

DB: There's a group in the Netherlands now bringing the miniature statue of Van Raalte, but are they there also in connection with Windmill Island?

GVW: I'd say that's a secondary issue right now, but it certainly is very much there. The people from the northern provinces where Van Raalte and many of the early settlers came from are very interested in having a relationship. One thing is that this used to be the agricultural strength of the Netherlands, those northern and eastern

provinces. But agriculture has its limitations, so there's a fairly high unemployment in those provinces. If we could develop some ties which would just strengthen the economic relationship, perhaps it would result in some businesses being developed in those northern provinces. That would be very much of interest to those people in the northern provinces. So, it certainly is a recognition of cultural history and heritage, but there's also some potential economic benefits on both sides. All this reminds us as a community of our heritage in a very creative way, and the possibility of Windmill Island going forward is more than 50% now. But, it's a big project.

DB: Well, you're talking about physically moving some dwellings from the Netherlands.

GVW: So, Dutch people have developed some techniques for taking them apart and putting them in containers and then reassembling them here. They put frames around a section of brick wall and then he moved it intact and then put it in place and reassembled it.

DB: I've heard that. They're really looking at it in definite then.

GVW: Right.

DB: We haven't talked about industry in the area. There's been a development of a lot of wide industry in the area in the last twenty or so years. It's actually increased in Holland, has it or has it held its own pretty well?

GVW: I think it's been a dramatic increase. Out of my engineering background, I really have a special interest and appreciation for this, but what interested me when I came to Holland was to discover so many homegrown industries. People have started in

their garages or basements and the business expands. They got an idea of what they can do and pretty soon they're out of their garage or basement into a small shop and it grows. You can trace this from Prince Corporation and Haworth which are the two most successful, but there are many others that are not of that same size but are really homegrown industries. I think that contributes so much to the community because you get the top leadership of the company, the leadership, the salesforce, and the technical force, and they add a dimension to the community. As compared to General Motors coming in and putting a manufacturing plant here. You'd have a plant manager and a few people, but you don't get the same, local people. This is one of the things I've noticed in so many ways working both at the college and community, particularly Holland Community Foundation. When you go to raise funds, the local industries will really support you, but these companies where you just have a plant and the corporate headquarters in Pittsburgh or California, they just don't make those kinds of decisions here. They don't have the commitment to the community. The plant manager might be here for three or four years and move on whereas the people who started these businesses from scratch are loyal to the community, they appreciate the support they've gotten, and the working force they have that helped them do it. So, that has been one of the great strengths of this community.

DB: I would imagine the city invites others or business just to settle in this area, too, and that would not be homegrown ones, but probably still looking to increase the number of businesses here.



GVW: Right. Although, I think that's very true and HEDCOR has done this.

DB: How about the Holland Foundation that you mentioned? Is that involved in this?

GVW: Well, indirectly. I was just going to mention to my involvement in this. The whole community foundation idea evolved in the 1920's in this country. The idea is that you have a foundation that local people will contribute to, particularly as they dispose of some of their assets in their estate planning. It becomes an endowment fund for the community for whatever good things can be done in the community. Some people started a community foundation here in the 1950's, some of the city leaders. But interest waned after a few years and it stayed on the books and it probably had maybe \$50,000 of assets, but for an endowment fund it wasn't making an impact. In the 1970's some people like John Fonger and Charles Conrad, Harvey Buter, took the leadership in reviving it. It was going in a modest level in the 1970's. Then when I retired from Hope in 1987, I was asked to go on the board of the Holland Community Foundation, and I thought I should do some community things that I hadn't had time for before. I think it was at about that time that we had assets of about \$400,000. But when you're just as an endowment fund and you're earning 5% of \$400,000, it's \$20,000. It doesn't make much of an impact. We decided to try to expand it, but then the Kellogg Foundation in the early 1990's developed a very interesting challenge grant program. Whereby they said to every community foundation in Michigan, "For every two dollars you raise for your endowment fund, we'll give you one dollar, up to one million dollars." We had assets of maybe \$400,000 or \$500,000 and we were raising thirty or forty

thousand dollars a year. We had five years to raise two million dollars which means you've got to raise \$400,000 a year. But, we had a great board so I helped in this and then spent a couple of years as chairman of the foundation and expanded our vision. One of the interesting things about the Kellogg Foundation requirements was all the funds we got from the Kellogg Foundation had to go into an endowment with the income being used to support youth activities. We also had to have a youth committee, made up of high school students who would on the one hand, help raise money. They assessed what the needs of the youth are and then they would play a major role in deciding where the income from this endowment fund would go. That came in about the time I was president so I contacted the principals of Holland and West Ottawa and Holland Christian and got the names of some students. We brought the first youth committee and actually we had five years to do this and just last year we had raised the two million for the endowment fund and we now have the million dollars from Kellogg and so we have this as a youth fund. Then just this year, Zeeland had a small community foundation. They also aspired to raise two million and get the one million, but they didn't have the base to do this. Bill Vanderbilt who left Hope College and went to Freedom Village, is now the Executive Director of the community foundation part time but he's also part time at the Zeeland foundation. Through his leadership, the boards got together and last April they merged the two. Now we have the Community Foundation of the Holland-Zeeland Area. And the Kellogg Foundation said, "OK, now you're a combined foundation. You still have the option of getting the second million

dollars." Now we're working on that and so we believe in the next year or two we'll do that. We would have these two million dollars in the youth fund and I think the assets of the foundation are now six or seven million dollars. Well, if you're giving away 5% of six million, you've got \$300,000 and then you can begin to make an impact on the community.

DB: Educational grants?

GVW: It could be. The main fields are education, health, environment, the arts, and historical preservation. Almost anything that will just enhance the quality of life in the community. That was another retirement activity I got involved in. I've had a lot of fun out of it.

DB: I knew you have not sat around after you left Hope, but I didn't know all the things you had done! I don't think I have any other questions that I thought of in advance. I'm sure there are so many things we haven't even touched on that would germane to the subject if you can think of anything else.

GVW: It really goes back to Hope College and the community. I remember when we built the Dow Center. We never thought about having community members, but then we realized that there are times of the day and also the summers when the students didn't need it and so we opened up these community memberships. They've been very, very popular, in fact there's a waiting list. That was another wonderful way to build community relationships. Just in regard to that Dow Center, when I came to Hope in 1972 the trustees had done something which everybody would advise them against, but I think it was OK, and that is in this period, Hope College was

without a president for two years, from '70 to '72. And in that period the board decided to have a major fundraising campaign called "Build Hope" and they retained a New York firm to help them, Brinkley John Price Jones. So, when I came here there was this campaign underway and one of my first tasks was to finish this. It was a modest effort, I think 8.7 million dollars was the goal. That was a lot of money to raise in the early 70's. I remember one of the big projects we wanted has now become the Dow Center. The Phys. Ed. department had these dreams and so on and I was all for them. I remember going to see the Dow Foundation and I asked them for a half million dollars for this facility. They turned us down that year, so the next year I went back and I asked them for \$300,000. I had a very nice visit with Herb Dow in Midland and then I had a call back from another person at the foundation, Ted Doan, one day and he said, "I'm just calling to tell you we decided to make you a grant of \$500,000." I remember Bob Young, who was then just starting out as Vice President of Development was in my office at that moment. However, I didn't know whether he said \$300,000 or \$500,00 and I didn't dare ask him to repeat it! So, I hung up and Bob asked how much and I said, "I think \$500,000." That was the key gift that made that whole thing go. Then as time went on, we worked on the plans and I went back to them and said, "Would you consider another \$500,000 and we'd like to call this the Dow Health and Physical Education Center. But that \$500,000 we'd like to use as an endowment fund for the operations." So, they gave it to us. We got a million dollars from the Dow Foundation for that project and that's what really made that

project go.

DB: If you don't ask, you don't get it. Well, during your term there, there was a lot of expansion and new buildings, the library named after you and Margaret.

GVW: I have pointed out to people that getting our name on it is kind of tribute to our failure, because what I had tried to do was sell someone with an idea. You know when I said the Dow Center, that was only about a 2.7 million dollar project. The library was 8.7 million. So, I tried to sell someone on a two or three million dollar gift and we'd put their name on it. I was unsuccessful. We did raise the money, but not in a large gift. So, then the library was built and they didn't have a name for it! That's how we got our name on it!

DB: Well, it's really not by default! The loss of Van Raalte. That was during your time?

GVW: Right, that was in 1980. That was during my time. We often wondered what to do with Van Raalte Hall because to make it accessible to the handicapped, which you had to do, would have been so difficult. We often wondered what to do, but we hadn't decided. In April of 1980 we were tearing up 12th St. and putting the walk way in. We had just finished the fall before renovating Van Vleck Hall, the original building on the campus, and then we had a fire in the roof of that building (painters set it on fire) on one Monday morning, and then the next Monday morning was the Van Raalte fire. Thus, we had two major fires within a week of each other. Sometimes the way I function is I go to sleep at night, but if I've got a lot on my mind I tend to wake up early. Once in a while when I do this, I'll just get

up and make some Ovaltine. On that Monday morning of the Van Raalte fire I had gotten up about four o'clock and made some Ovaltine because I wanted to get a little more sleep. I remember as I was in the dining room, I was looking out and it was all peaceful and quiet. I looked out at Van Raalte Hall, but then that Ovaltine worked. I slept so soundly, I didn't hear the fire engines or anything. The first thing I heard that morning, the doorbell was ringing about six thirty. I got up and our bedroom overlooked VanRaalte and I could see the flames at Van Raalte, but the doorbell was Public Safety wanting to use our telephone for some reason. Here was a fire engine in between our house and Van Raalte and I'd been so sound asleep I didn't hear any of that.

DB: That was some loss.

GVW: But, you know, in the long run, it was almost a blessing. Because we didn't know what to do with that building and now that that area is open it makes the campus so much more attractive. Van Raalte and Dimnent Chapel were too close together and now you appreciate Dimnent Chapel much more. You work hard and try to make the best decisions, but behind it all so often you just see the Lord guiding and directing in ways that are beyond your comprehension. On occasion people wondered, you really didn't start that, did you?!

DB: You missed it like a toothache, right?

GVW: We do have a lot of wonderful memories of our years at Hope and the years we've stayed in the community since then. I hope I haven't talked too much.

DB: No, it's great and if you can think of anything else that you'd really like to have

included in this, all you have to do is call and say so.