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Visscher, Cora Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Tracy Bednarick

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Interview #2
Mrs. Cora Visscher
Holland's Past Fifty Years

Conducted by:
Tracy Bednarick
May 29, 1996

Abstract Topics include, in this general order: family, life after World War II, a comparison of the War effort in Holland to that in Philadelphia, schools and how they are changing in Holland, the qualities that maintain the current Holland community, the problem of the Holland community "closing" itself off, changes in the city (which include diversity, child care, and industry), crime and safety, committees and organizations that Mrs. Cora Visscher was a part of, planning commission and community development, downtown and mall controversy, changes in the church, Weed and Seed, changing role of women, community feeling, and the problem of prejudice in the city of Holland.
Interviewee: Cora Visscher (CV) Retired director of the Children’s Resource Network for the city of Holland Michigan
Interviewer: Tracy Bednarick (TLB) Oral History Student Coordinator
Parenthesis indicate questions written on the first draft. Each is followed by the interviewee’s written response.

TLB: The date is May 29, 1996. We are here in the basement of Van Wylen Library with Cora Visscher for the Summer Oral History Project of 1996. First thing I want you to do is just state your name, your date of birth, where you were born, when you where born, if you want to, if you are not originally from Holland where you came from.

CV: My name is Cora Visscher. (Mrs. Visscher, what is your maiden name?) Kaepernik.
I was born on [date removed], 1938 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I lived in Philadelphia until 1945 when I moved to Holland with my family and I have been here ever since.

TLB: What was Holland like when you first came here?

CV: It was very different from what I was used to. I was born and raised in the early part of my life in an integrated neighborhood in Philadelphia. My family was a very committed Methodist family. When we came to Holland, I can say there was culture shock. Not as much for me as a young child, but for my mother, especially. My father had lived here, and that is why we came back here; he had lived here as a boy. (What is your father’s name?) Herbert Kaepernik (What was the reason he came back to Holland?) He loved the area and the lake. It was very difficult, because Holland at that time was a very closed community. One predominant religious group that established the mores in the community. So to come in as an outsider you were very clearly an outsider.
TLB: Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Do you have children?

CV: I have four children and nine grandchildren. Who fortunately for me, all live in the area. My son is in Grandville, and the rest of my children live in Holland. My daughter, Carin, is a Holland City Council woman, Carin Ribbens. My daughter, Cindy, is the executive director of Community Action House. One of my sons is a therapist in Grand Rapids and my other son is carpet layer in Holland.

TLB: I bet it is nice to have your whole family around.

CV: We have wonderful, wonderful family time. We travel together and we have a very good time together. I’ve neglected to mention my dear husband and best friend, Henry. He retired at the same time that I did, at the end of last year. He was a banker for FMB.

TLB: What have you been doing since you retired?

CV: We’ve travelled a great deal. We both are avid golfers, so when we can find good weather we play a lot of golf. We’re both readers. We both like to do biking. So we keep busy.

TLB: Yes, keep busy. Can you talk a little bit about what it was like right after World War II in Holland? I know that there were quite a few veterans that returned to the area. Do you remember at all what that was like?

CV: Yes, I remember that a little bit. In that, there was a change in the community. That was exactly the time that I arrived here. I think that there was a change in the community based on the fact that jobs were not as plentiful as they had been during the war. My father had a job when we came here, so it did not affect him. So of
course, at that time, it wasn't even a consideration that my mother would be looking for a job. We were fine. But I remember hearing about in the community and from my father, in the neighborhood about fewer jobs for more people. I think there was a little tension maybe in that people who were in jobs in the war may have been replaced by people coming home from the war. That may have been a sense of patriotic duty, appreciation, or whatever that may have been. Or maybe, they had hired people into jobs that weren't as appropriate.

There was quite a contrast to what had gone on in Holland during the war, as opposed to what had gone on for me where I lived during the war. I would talk to my friends about things like air raids. Where we had air raids almost every night, because we lived about eight miles from the Philadelphia navy yard, which is the biggest navy installment. My father was an air raid warden and my mother knitted things for the military. We were very much into that. When I talked to my friends here about things like air raids they just didn't. I mean their may have been some, but nothing of any consequence. My experience during the war was very different, so in discussing that it was even more noticeable to me how I had come from a very different place.

TLB: Can you talk a little bit about what school was like in Holland when you came here?

CV: I had a wonderful school experience. I went to Lincoln elementary school when I moved here. It was wonderful for me. I walked to school in the morning, walked home for lunch, walked back in the afternoon. I was very active in a lot of things, so very seldom came directly home after school, because there was always activities.
School in Holland is hard for me to compare it to school in Philadelphia because my experience there was so brief in school. But school in Holland was really wonderful; I can say that all the way through my entire school experience here. I don’t know if the teachers were extraordinarily committed or if that was just the community value, but my school experience was really wonderful.

TLB: Have you, from talking to your children and from your grandchildren, noticed changes in the school systems in Holland in the past fifty years, since you were in school, besides societal kind of changes?

CV: No, all of my grandchildren, one is at West Ottawa, five are in the Holland system, the others live in Grand Rapids. In both West Ottawa and the Holland system, I would say my grandchildren are enjoying the same excellent experience. I don’t know as much about the West Ottawa Schools; I think the Holland Schools are extraordinary. There are social problems within the schools. And I wonder sometimes if there is a lot of fear about that and if too much is made of that. I talk about it a lot to my grandchildren and they say, “Yeah, there are all different kinds of people there, but that is not my group. And they are no more interested in me than I am in them, so we just go our own ways.” So I think sometimes we make a bigger deal out of that than we need to.

TLB: I think sometimes parents make a bigger deal about that.

CV: I think they are very very afraid. I think that part of that comes from their own fear that they have not instilled strong enough values of their own and that their children will be easily lead by others. That had not ever been a fear of mine.
TLB: What are some qualities that you see that really stand out in the city of Holland?

CV: Pride in the environment. A good work ethic. I think that is shared by all, I don’t think that that has changed dramatically. I don’t think that work ethic is attributed to any one ethnic group or cultural group more than another. I think that there is a Christian commitment here. Some people, I think, really live that Christianity. Some espouse it, others really live it. I think that we have a strong commitment to the community. There is a lot of volunteerism. I like the size of the community. Having lived in a really huge city, this is a very manageable city. It is big enough to be stimulating and have things to offer, but small enough to be manageable. I think we have handled the growth fairly well.

TLB: To follow that naturally: Do you see any negative aspects of Holland? Or any drawbacks to living in Holland?

CV: I think some people coming here still find it to be something of a closed community. So I think that we haven’t grown very much in that regard, in some respects. I still think that among some people, and it is probably true of any community, but I still here from people moving in Holland, there is a real difference people that have been here a long time and people moving in. I’ve heard people say that our Newcomer’s Club is one of the largest, most active clubs, because it is so hard to break in here. I think that is a real failing. I think that there are things that are happening in the community that are somewhat superficial in all our efforts to be inclusive and breakdown cultural barriers, prejudices and that thing. I think that some of those are trappings and some of those are really worthwhile. But I think that it is a sad
commentary about a city when people say, "We have the biggest and most active Newcomer’s club, because it is so hard to break in." I think that that is a really sad commentary. So there might be a smugness here. It is hard for me to see it, because now after being here as long as I have I think that I am one of the insiders, but not happy to be perceived that way.

TLB: Right. Let’s talk about some of the changes in Holland. What are some of the biggest changes that you have seen in the past fifty years?

CV: Well obviously, the growth. The diversity in the population. I’ve seen some people, and probably an significant group of people become somewhat more accepting of the diversity.

TLB: Do you think that is changing more so now, as more and more people are coming to the community and establishing themselves, the acceptance is changing?

CV: Yes, I think part of what happens is that there was a void in this community when I came here. People didn’t have the opportunity to interact with other cultures. So maybe some of those attitudes were just a common outgrowth out of the fact that it was such a homogeneous community. Now I believe that more association and more exposure to different things and different people brings about acceptance.

TLB: Have you been involved with any of the changes that Holland has seen, or if not, how have you reacted to these changes?

CV: I think I have been greatly involved with changes regarding children. In all of my working life I’ve worked in the area of improving the quality of life for children. Probably the biggest change has been in the area of child care. Even when I began
working at the Holland Day Care Center, in 1969 or 70, it was the only child care center anywhere in the county. Basically, was the Headstart center, dealing with low income children. There was just not the working population that demanded a child care system. Now we have right within the city limits of Holland, probably 400 plus family day care homes, licensed to provide care for kids. And probably six or seven centers providing care for children. And then probably a whole lot of unlicensed child care is going on. I think I played a very active roll in that change. And maybe part of that, my zeal, came from the fact that I wanted to make sure that it was out in the open that our work force was changing because women were going to work.

TLB: What is the state of child care in Holland now? There is so much industry. Four hundred day care centers...home day cares seem like a lot. Is everybody able to find affordable day care? Is there stuff being done for people who are just scraping?

CV: I don’t think there is anywhere near enough being done for low income families. It is funny, I’ve learned over my years working in child care, that it is not a commodity that is valued by some people. Even if they are two professional working parents, they don’t want to pay much for child care. Some how we’ve missed that part of the education. I think that some of them list it in this is what it will cost: to get my dry cleaning done, my house cleaned, my car serviced, my child care, my etcetera. That is how it is sometimes. The fact that they are low income doesn’t mean that they are the only group that is looking for very low cost child care. That is discouraging to me. I think that you have really recognize that low income people need assistance. There is some through the Department of Social Services, or now called Family
Independence Agency, but we need to come up with ways with which we can subsidize providers in a lot of ways: in their education, in their equipment. So they don't have to spend the little amount of money they do make on keeping themselves in business. So I think we have to be real creative. I just finished writing a $500,000 Kellogg grant for the Holland Community Foundation for a group of child care provider programs asking for funds to do exactly those things.

TLB: Do you think that the industries in Holland have a responsibility to help with child care?

CV: I do believe that they do, but what they do in Holland is they provide a child care referral service, an enhanced child care referral system for their employees. They are not willing to do anything more than that. I understand their position some, because of the inequity if you began to offer big child care benefits, because you have employees without children. Then you get into equity of benefits programming and I appreciate their problem there. But I also know that we as a society are going to have to value our children above all. If there is anything I feel that I did not do in my long career as "champion" of children is to really try to change that attitude about children. They are the future. And when I was trying to sell the program to industry about the child care referral I said, "If you don't want to do it for the employees you have right now, do it for your work-force 20 years from now, unless you begin to groom that work-force with good quality nurturing and education forget it." Be long term thinking.

TLB: How do you think the problems facing the citizens of Holland have changed in the
past 50 years? Is crime different? How is daily life different?

CV: When I think back about my early years here: the simplicity of life. The streets were not crowded, traffic was simple. Peoples' lives were more relaxed. There was more time for leisure. There was more interaction between neighbors than you see now. The whole crime situation, I think in Holland, has probably grown proportionately to the growth in the community. I have serious concerns about the rise in crime, violent crime, committed by teenagers and young people. I have serious concerns about that. I think part of that is because we, as a society, have put weapons in their hands. Holland was slower.

There were more community type events. Parades probably would bring out the same number of people down that they bring out now. I'm thinking of the Memorial Day parade that we just had. Holland was so much smaller. I think there was more of that kind of participation in things. Tulip Time was fun. It was more fun. It was not as commercial. The streets were not lined with wagons selling all manner of the things. It was very much a community event that the community put on. I believe that change has not been positive, because now it is a very commercial type event.

Safety: I walked all over. I walked five...when I was in junior high my father died when I was very young. I was only thirteen when he had a heart attack at 48 and died. My mom and I had some struggles. I guess I'll preface this with that, because you may wonder. But if I had activities in school or whatever that ended at 9:30 at night I walked home. Both my mother and I felt perfectly safe with that
arrangement. Now you wouldn’t do that. So it just seemed like there was more safety. As I want to repeat, I think that the crime in Holland has grown only proportionate to the growth of the population. I think we have exemplary services in Holland. I think that the Holland Police Department is just excellent. I wouldn’t want to imply that they haven’t kept up; I think that they certainly have.

TLB: Do you want to talk about a particular job or aspect of your job that you have really enjoyed in the past 50 years that just stands out, some responsibility that you had that you really got a lot of fulfillment from?

CV: I’ve done a lot of things. While I always had a full-time job as director of the Children’s Resource Network, I’ve done a lot of other things. I was a participant in different city departments. I chaired the Holland Planning Commission for 5 years. And I was part of the 20/10 Committee. A lot of things like that. I think that one thing about my job that was so rewarding is that it let me participate in a lot of different things. I think that I had input into decisions that were made in the city. Some good, some bad. (Could you talk about some of the bad and good decisions?) One bad decision would be the lack of encouragement for putting the mall within the city limits. I was part of the first committee when Cablevision came to Holland. Part of that effort. I think that one of the things that was so rewarding to me over the years was to be part of things as they were happening. My years on the Planning Commission, which were probably for 1980-87, something like that.

TLB: Were you involved with the downtown development?

CV: Downtown development, very involved when the malls were looking for places to be
in Holland, within the city of Holland was one of the possibilities.

TLB: Do you remember how the community reacted to some of the things that the Planning Commission was doing: the downtown development, the malls?

CV: As you would imagine, directly, the reaction was directly related to how it affected them. When the mall was looking at the 24th street property the downtown merchants just came together and fought very very hard. I didn’t quite understand that at the time because a mall was coming, and it didn’t really matter if it was on 24th or James Street. It was still going to affect the downtown merchants the same way. And if we could have been successful in keeping it in the city limits we could have all, including the downtown merchants, enjoyed the tax base that we would have generated from it. I never quite understood that...there was reluctance to see that it was coming any way and where didn’t make much difference, except that we would have kept more money in the city.

I worked on something for 20 years there that was interesting; it is a side hobby of mine, having been involved in sacred dance (liturgical dance). That was very interesting, because we danced in churches, to see back when I began 26 years ago...1970 or 71... to see the acceptance of that. And that was another little opportunity for me to peek into groups of people that I otherwise would not have had access to. Early on we weren’t acknowledged by many of the churches in Holland, much less would they have us there to dance. They made it very clear that they did not approve. Then there was a period of time where things began to change. Western Seminary invited us there to dance. In 1980, we were asked to go to Florida
to go to the Reformed Church National meeting. That gained us some credibility.

But finally we were asked by a couple of the Christian Reformed churches. But we couldn’t dance on Sunday in the church service, we did it on a week night in a fellowship hall or something. There was a whole new appreciation. And now, this many years later, I believe that some of those churches have dance of their own. That is kind of a symbol of what I’ve seen change in the church... in the community. It is just an openness. A willingness to test and try. That was a very interesting opportunity for me to kind of peek in and see.

I worked hard on the Weed and Seed grant when we first got it here. I’ve just had a lot of opportunities to take part in community wide efforts.

TLB: How do you think the role of the church is changing in the community, with the influence of the church on the community?

CV: I think that has diminished, greatly. I think part of that is individuals’ openness. It used to be that politics were determined from the pulpit. People were very willing to go with what the dominie said. I see now many more people open, learning, forming individual opinions. I think that, that has diminished the role of the church, if you will, in community life. Not to suggest that there is a lot less church attendance and church participation and people getting great spiritual nurture and social interaction from their churches. I still think that that is a vital and wonderful part of the community. I don’t know that the church has influence over other areas such as politics and decision making.

TLB: You said that you worked on the Weed and Seed grant, how do you feel about the
program now that it has been running for a year now, has it?

CV: Oh no, it is more than two.

TLB: I remember reading about it when I came here. How would you gauge its effectiveness?

CV: I think it has done excellent with the "weeding" side of it. Law enforcement has been beefed up. I think that we have learned a lot about community policing and the effectiveness of that. I have not seen much change in the "seeding" part. And part of that is because the resources were very heavily into "weeding" and very little of the resources went to "seeding." I think that the effect of the program is reflective of the way the money was used. Not to say that that is bad. But one of the things that is an attitude about people working in the public arena, city government, county government, they somehow feel that social services, especially non-profit social service should just be supplying the services without the need for funding. Because after all isn't that what you are in the community to do. But they fail to see that it is just like running a business, you have to pay a staff, you have to pay insurance. The money has to be there. I think there was a little tension in the Weed and Seed between the "weeders" and the "seeders". But ultimately, I think that the money was probably used as well or better as it will be in other parts of the country where they funded programs.

TLB: Have you seen the role of women change since you’ve been in Holland? How has it changed?

CV: Dramatically. I was looking through, about the time that I retired I was being very
nostalgic, and going back through a lot of the newspaper clippings and that kind of thing. I, also having been a member of the Holland Junior Welfare league at that time, I remember this very clearly, early in the 70s if I did something like I chaired a meeting for the newly created Children's Resource Network the only way the paper would list my name is to list it as Mrs. Henry Visscher. No one women ever used their first name. And I always wondered what about the single women or divorced women. The answer was given to me when I challenged the paper on that. We don't print things that those people do!

TLB: Oh my! [laughter]

CV: That was only one person, that wasn't the newspaper policy, but it was enough to send me running. But then that changed, abruptly. It was right about the time that the Holland Sentinel changed their policy I began to see changes. I was a candidate for the Holland City Council at one time, and that was an unusual thing at that time. It was very early on, I was in my early to middle 20s. I was married, but there the assumption by some of the people that I couldn't be married or I wouldn't be doing that. On my literature I had my family to prove that.

TLB: You see if you weren't married, they couldn't have talked about you.

CV: They couldn't have talked about me. Yes, tremendous change. I still think that we are kicking and screaming to try to be recognized in the church. Now that is very different for me, because as I told you early on I am a very devout and committed Methodist and have been all my life. I had a women minister when I was a child. The Methodist church has always ordained women and men equally. In the high
positions in the Methodist church you will find women. Our bishop right now for our area is a women. (What church do you go to?) Saugatuck United Methodist. So for me, that was another thing, when we moved here and heard all this, there were so many things that were so very hard for me to understand. I remember being tempted to go with my friends to church, go to their youth groups because it was easier. And I can still clearly see my mother and hear her say, "Cora, it's not that we go to the Methodist Church, we are Methodist!" [laughter] So I always knew exactly what it was, and never wavered from that. I find that the Church is very compatible with or I grew to be compatible with the church, I don’t know. But that church is very compatible with what I think.

TLB: I found it interesting coming to the Holland community that a lot of the ethnic groups that come to the Holland community end up adopting the Dutch Reformed Church. I was talking to Monika Giddy yesterday. She said that it was because the churches sponsor them. I don’t know if that is why.

CV: I think that you will find that those will mostly be Asians and it is true. They were sponsored by those churches and it was kind of a package deal.

TLB: Right.

CV: I don’t think you will find as many Hispanics that are connected to the Reformed Church.

TLB: They seem to hold on to the Catholicism.

CV: Right

TLB: Do you have friends and relatives that live outside the Holland Area, that come and
visit and comment on the differences that they see in Holland?

CV: For instance my sister when she comes back, of course she had lived here, she comments always on the growth and change in the community. But when I hear people who come here to visit and were not natives here at any time, everything is very very favorable. Our city presents itself in very favorable light. I think that thanks to Mr. Prince and Mrs. Prince, we have a downtown that is unequalled. I truly believe that. We do present ourselves as hospitable. We don't air our dirty linen, if there is that. Our prejudices and the times when we don't accept are not open. I mean people can't see our problems. (Do you see this as having any effect on the Holland community? Is there a point when it can be too much?) I think that it's only natural for a community to present itself in it's best light. I feel that it's important for all of us to work on creating an "everyday" city that is the model we present to visitors. I think that we present as a very progressive city. Our high employment possibilities are very attractive to people.

There is one unique thing about Holland, and I'm sure that as you have been out...well I don't know how many people you have talked to...one very unique thing about Holland is the entrepreneurial attitudes. All of the biggest employers in Holland are hometown employers. Mr. Haworth was a shop teacher when I went to Holland High. Edgar Prince was a product of Holland. The DePrees were Holland/Zeeland. The Donnelley family. I mean all of our largest employers are local.

TLB: And they stay in the community too.
CV: Yes they stay in the community. That causes them to be much more generous to the community. I mean if you look at the Prince contribution, the Padnos contribution; they are all hometown people. They were here when I was here growing up here, and as I said, teaching here. And I think that is what makes Holland extremely unique. Our quality child care system, which we started as a consortium of about 20 area employers that pay into a system that provides child care training and such. I’ve been asked to provide consultation to other communities and it is simply not successful. I can’t tell you, maybe the one where I went and did some work and it is now running is maybe Midland. It is totally controlled by Dow, as is most of Midland. When you look at Holland though, there is not one controlling employer. There are several and they are several that are hometown people that have a keen interest in the community. It became very clear to me that we can’t replicate what we have here, because our situation here is so unusual.

TLB: It is 10:13, is there anything else you want to add?

CV: I guess I would like to say that while I have been able to see some of the problems that we have here, growing up in Holland has been a good experience for me. I’ve been sad sometimes, because it was so different from how my earlier years were, which were years of total acceptance. I never learned prejudice until I moved to Holland, Michigan. But probably because I could see change and because my experience in school was so wonderful, the town was a safe place to live, there was many things to do, and you could gain a real sense of being part of a community.

TLB: Do you think that there is still a tendency for people to limit themselves from
knowing about what is out there?

CV: Absolutely, the only thing that is different probably is probably that there are still those who will not see. They are very narrow in their thinking. They won’t expose themselves to other things. That is a shrinking group. Possibly because the younger people that are growing up, that were part of the system are opening up. And also because the city is growing around them, so percentage wise they are less and less. They are definitely still here. I could weep sometimes when I hear child care referral counsellors talk about the calls that they get that are so hateful in what we consider to be a Christian community. I think we’re not getting anywhere. For me, part of what my early life was, and part of what my family believed I honestly, and I am being as honest as I can be, but I didn’t know about prejudice until I moved to Holland. It was startling to me, because there was this sense that and what people would expound upon what a Christian community it was, but then things that I would hear and see were totally different from what I had learned as a young child as Christianity. So there was and imbalance of information there that I couldn’t, well not even imbalance, it just didn’t jive. There were two messages there; I was very confused here. So I think that there are some. I know that from the calls that we get.

TLB: What are, when somebody calls and it isn’t a pleasant phone call, some of the things they are usually upset about?

CV: No, they’ll call and say, "I need names of people who do child care, but don’t give me any Mexicans or any...."
TLB: Wow.

CV: It is hurtful. Just a total disregard. People that will just generalize the cultural group. It has got to be fear. It has got to be fear. I can’t even imagine it. So that still exists, but I think as the town community grows around it and we become more accepting. I think that it is not going to happen as much because the city sets up a commission about it, it is going to happen people to people. The churches can be a wonderful vehicle to bring about change. I see it happening in some places.

TLB: They’re a wonderful place to bring people together too.

CV: That is exactly right. So all and all my experience living here; I am very glad I lived here. We have not wanted to change where we lived. There were several times during my husband’s career that he, we would be at a banking convention somewhere and someone would outright offer him a job, and we always choose to stay in Holland, giving up some other benefits. We felt that it was a good place that we want to raise our children. And our children appreciate the community, obviously, because they have stayed here and they are participants here.

[discussion on method through which the interview will be transcribed and interviewer’s life]

TLB: Well thank you very much.

CV: It was very nice to meet you, I hope you got something of interest.

TLB: Oh yeah!

CV: Bye Bye!
(Mrs. Visscher, How did you originally get involved in child care? Could you talk a little about your first jobs in the child care business?)

I left the West Ottawa school in 1970 to work as the Assistant Director of the Holland Day Care Center. My years in the public schools gave me the opportunity to see that a "head start" was essential to get children ready to learn. I am committed to the concept of early intervention in the complex process of learning and early identification of children who need extra help.

While working in the center, I saw that programs and education institutions did not always address the unique needs of individual children. I started the Children’s Resource Network to try to create as many options as possible for children to grow and develop.
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