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Wagenaar, Larry J Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Ena Brooks
Oral History Interview with
Larry J. Wagenaar

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by Ena Brooks

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
EB: Why don't we start by having you state your name and your birthdate and telling a little bit about your family background.

LW: My name is Larry John Wagenaar. I was born on [date removed], 1962, some thirty-five years ago. I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at Blodgett Memorial Hospital to Mary and Cornelius Wagenaar, both who were immigrants from the Netherlands. My father emigrated around 1950 in the aftermath of World War II, was drafted within six months of his arrival. He was able to fenagle going to Germany instead of Korea, courted my mother in a whirlwind romance, got married and then returned to the United States, I believe, in 1952.

EB: Do you have any siblings?

LW: Two brothers. The eldest is Allen Wagenaar, originally Cornelius Allen but now Allen Cornelius, and he was born in 1953. He and I operated a chain of video stores in the early 1980s. After that he went to work for Howard Miller and has since moved a couple of times and is in Wisconsin. My middle brother is Frank and he works for Abbott Laboratories in Chicago, Illinois.

EB: You said you were born in Grand Rapids, did you live in Grand Rapids or have you always lived in Holland?

LW: I was born in Grand Rapids and lived there until the age of four, I believe. Then in an ongoing effort to have allergy relief, my mother moved to the lakeshore with my
father. I was four and a half, five years old, and have lived in the Holland area ever since. I grew up in a house out by Ottawa Beach, not within sight, but very close to the beach. I pretty much grew up with Lake Michigan being right next door.

EB: Tell me a little bit about Holland while you were growing up.

LW: It was a much different town. When I grew up, growing up out there, which is now very much upscale condominiums and homes and everything else, at that time it was very much a vacant land area. Growth was very slow. I think my parents paid $25,000 in 1967 to build their house which had Lake Michigan access. So it was a different time. Fond memories of growing up: I think probably the ones that are most pertinent to the history project might be my recollection of working in the city. When I was eleven years old, my parents had built these ice cream carts, these push ice cream carts. The business was called Short Stop Ice Cream. There was originally one cart and we ultimately had three carts. My middle brother started doing it and then I did it starting when I was 11 until I was fifteen. So that's four or five years pushing an ice cream cart up and down the streets of Holland. Now, Holland was a much different town. I'm not sure that you would send a twelve year old out with an ice cream cart in the 1990s. But in the mid to early 1970s, Holland was a relatively safe place. It was more homogenous, but still had a significant Hispanic population. The crime levels in the mid '70s were lower than they are today. I don't recall, but maybe once or twice in those entire five years, where I felt afraid of my environment. I'm not even sure if that was an accurate perception being an adolescent. But it was good money, I bought a bicycle, did that kind of stuff. It was a year to move on
when I was sixteen because then I had a driver's license and could drive to a job. But it instilled a work ethic that's typical of the Dutch immigrant experience--the desire to make it. Since my parents had been young when they had experienced the Depression and spent World War II in an occupied country, they are very aware of wanting to have financial security and to instill a sincere work ethic in their children. I was raised Christian Reformed, which especially during the '60s and '70s, was a relatively strict experience, with pretty strict Sabbatarian practices. There were a lot of things you couldn't do on Sunday, which was typical of the whole town. I mean the town shut up on Sunday. None of the stores were open. The bowling alley, which was the first to open on Sunday, I think opened while I was in high school or thereabouts. So that was a relatively typical experience. As I got older and since I was the youngest child, I think I was allowed to more things than maybe my older brothers were able to do. I remember when I was real young, we couldn't listen to television on Sunday or radio. But by the time I was in my pre-teens, we were listening to Tiger baseball, and slowly the rules began to lessen.

EB: Do you have experiences about those Sundays when maybe you were doing something that you shouldn't have been doing?

LW: I'm sure there were. I had a couple of friends in the neighborhood and I don't remember myself being a particular willful child where I got myself into a lot of trouble, probably things like swimming on Sunday when you weren't supposed to or something like that, nothing that I recall getting into deep trouble for.

EB: Why don't you tell a little bit about where you went to school, grade school, high
LW: I went to grade school at Rose Park Christian, which is still standing on the north side of Holland. It was a smaller school then. I rode the bus. We rode busses from West Ottawa Public and we rode those busses, as I recall, to the public elementary. Then we'd get on another bus which would take us from the public elementary to the Christian school, if I recall correctly. It was a relatively long bus ride because I lived out by the lake and that tended to be the end of the line. So for me it was usually a forty-five minute bus ride to school and a forty-five minute bus ride back. I remember we rode through Waukazoo Woods and all the way around; it was a long ride. I have fond memories. It was a relatively small school, very homogenous. At that time the Christian schools were pretty much kids from Christian Reformed backgrounds. You didn't see, as you do today, a very multi-religious, I'm thinking denominationally, or multi-ethnic. I think when I finally got to middle school there were one or two Hispanic students, but in the whole school population that was pretty small. I went to middle school at the Christian Middle School, which at that time was where River Avenue divides into State and Michigan Avenue by 19th Street. There were two much older structures. One was torn down, the other was turned into Evergreen Commons. And then off to the Christian High School which is out on Ottawa Avenue. As I look at it now, the school was relatively new because I think it was built in '69 and I went there in the late '70s. So the school was only ten years old. It was a nice place to go.

EB: Have any of those schools, particularly the high school, changed since you left?
LW: I haven't been back a lot. It doesn't look like it just looking at it from the outside. They have added a big new middle school, well, not so new anymore, and next to the high school there is a new elementary. But walking through the high school recently, it looks very much the same in 1997 as it did in 1977. There's been maybe a few minor changes, but the school facility hasn't grown much in size. I did notice a lot more diversity in the school system. Both somewhat on an ethnic level but more so on not simply being a school where Christian Reformed kids went.

EB: From high school did you attend college?

LW: I did.

EB: Where did you go to college?

LW: (laughs) I was supposed to go to Calvin College. At that time it was almost a given that if you graduated from Holland Christian or one of the Christian Schools, you would go to Calvin. If I recall correctly—I wouldn't want to swear on a stack of Bibles—the advising staff at the Christian High School filled out the application practically for you to go Calvin. All you had to do was sign it and they'd mail it in for you. So it was pretty much a given. Four weeks before the school year was supposed to start in September, I had some second thoughts. Now, I would love to tell you that those second thoughts were based on that experience and the fact that I didn't want to be with everyone else going to Calvin, and that played a part of it. But to be fair, it was probably more the fact that my girlfriend from high school was going to Calvin and we had broken up and I decided I really didn't want to go there. That was part of it. Part of it is I had a job in Holland and Hope had seemed more
and more appealing. My brother had gone to Hope [Frank, '79]. That did play a part also. So there was probably a confluence of a number of events. So I was one of the last people admitted to the class of, at that time, the class of '84. I came to college in the fall of 1980 and did all right, found that history was more my aptitude. I did well in history courses from the beginning. But two things happened: one is my brother, my eldest brother, had gotten into the video business and started out by selling collector's video tapes out of his basement. This was when the video revolution was just beginning. Home video tape recorders had just gone on the market. He decided to open up a small little store called Video Today near the corner of 10th and River Avenue, in the Phoenix Building, kitty corner to the old post office. He also ran a mail order business out of his basement. The name of the mail order business was called Video Heaven Incorporated. The Video Heaven enterprise started selling video games, and this was when the Atari video game craze was starting to blow up in the early '80s. We did quite well with that. Then we started selling books related to rock music mostly, and advertised that through the rock fanzines—you know those magazines kids buy on rock and roll artists. At that time Duran Duran was big and all that stuff. So we had sort of three different elements to that operation. We moved the mail order business to a store front on Lakewood Avenue near River next to a place that sells typewriters. I ran that for a while. In '82 when I was getting more involved with that and it was more of a full-time job, I realized I didn't know quite what I was doing at Hope College, what I wanted to do. I was a B student. I mean I was all right, but I wasn't great. So I decided to take some time off. I got
more into the business. The mail order business did really well, and ultimately we consolidated it with a new downtown store for Video Today. I got more and more involved in both video retail at Video Today while still doing the mail order business. I think the music/book business was called Notebooks, so there were virtually three businesses: there was Video Today, this Video Heaven thing still, and then Notebooks. I did that until the spring of 1985. So from fall '82 until spring '85, that's what I did. Then I realized I really wasn't being very fulfilled, and my brother and I did not get along well; we often disagreed on policy and major decisions. Jon Huiskens, who is the Registrar here at Hope College, kept nagging me to return to Hope and finish, as did Larry Penrose on the history faculty. Finally, not being very happy working in that work atmosphere, and I found working with my brother was a difficult challenge anyway, I decided to quit, cash out what little interest I had in the business and return to Hope. That was in the fall of '85 that I returned to Hope. It ended up being a very good decision because at that time the video business was sort of at a peak. It had grown exponentially over that five year period and was really doing well. My brother decided to expand into Grand Rapids with three new store simultaneously and then bought a music record business (Woodmark), all of which ended up failing. And the business actually went bankrupt in 1989. But I had been out for a long time by then. I returned to Hope in the fall of '85. That's when I decided to major in history and religion, and was a much better student the second time around. I was a little older, more focused, was very involved in student government, wrote for the Anchor, and was the student rep to the Board of Trustees.
There were a lot of things like that. I was a noisier student in the sense that, because I was a little older and I had done some business work, wasn't quite as naive as maybe some of the other students, or at least I felt that way, whether it was realistic or not. I was able to be a little more vocal on campus as a non-traditional student. So that was kind of fun. I graduated in May of '87.

EB: What did you do from there in '87?

LW: Then I had to decide what I wanted to do from there. That's a good question. I majored in history, so I applied to, I think: four or five different graduate schools for history and one in religion. I got accepted by several of them, but the best package was at Kent State University, which is where Robert Swierenga was teaching. Swierenga was known as probably the leading Dutch immigration expert, and they had another immigration historian at Kent State, an immigration focus. And I was interested in immigration history. So I went there and studied immigration history with the expectation at that point of going all the way through the Ph.D. program. Kent had a two-stage program. There was an independent masters and then there was an independent Ph.D. program. You could get either one, or start with one and proceed to the Ph.D. program. Many programs, if you get an M.A. from only the Ph.D. granting institution, that means you washed out. But at Kent that wasn't the case. So I went through the masters program, and it was only three or four months into the program that I became aware of the position here at Hope College that was opening up for the director of the Joint Archives. I actually didn't give it much thought, but I was encouraged by Swierenga to at least throw my hat into the ring,
and I wasn't even done with my first term at graduate school. I just kind of laughed, but I did it any way. They had 40 or 50 applicants and then they cut that down to ten and I was still in it, and then they cut it down to four and I was still in it. Then I got interviewed and got the job. Even before I was hired, which didn't happen until May of the next year actually, it was a long process--I had already added some archival science courses to my second semester of graduate school because luckily they had a library science program at Kent. I decided it would be wise to have some archival courses in case this position was offered and I ended up accepting. Then when I was hired in early May, that required me to go full-time during the summer. So I took a full load, not like a year's load of courses but a full semester plus load of courses in the summer. So I finished all my course work, which left just my thesis to write. I literally finished classes on August the twelfth and I was on the job four or five days later here.

EB: What were your first thoughts of the Archives?

LW: It was an empty room when I was interviewed. There was nothing in it. The reading room wasn't finished. Nothing was in the storage area when I was interviewed which was early May, 1988. So I didn't know quite what I was getting into. When I was at Hope the second time, from 1985 to 1987, I had worked at the museum, the Netherlands Museum as it was known then, and worked in some of their archival collections, helped them do some indexing and so on. So I had some familiarity with the Museum's archives and the mess that they were in. So I knew that that was a challenge. I didn't know much about the College archival collection. I knew a little
bit about the Seminary's because I had done some research in it. The three collections were interesting. The College's was probably the best organized. The Seminary's was the worst organized but the best looking because all of them were in nice gray boxes, Hollinger boxes as we call them. But inside the boxes they were a mess. The Museum's was both physically unattractive and a mess. Theirs was probably in the worst shape of all. I should probably give you a little history about the Joint Archives since we are doing this for posterity. The idea of a joint archives goes back to the early 1970s. Robert Warner, who was archivist in the United States, I think this was even before he became archivist in the United States, was talking with Elton Bruins. He commented to Elton that you've got these three institutions with collections that clearly relate to one another, you ought to bring them together into one facility. Elton never let go of that idea. When the public library was considering an expansion in the early-1970s, mid-1970s, they tried to make a joint archives facility fly as part of their expansion. The expansion never happened; the concept died. The Seminary built that tall library structure, which is six stories tall, in 1979/80. They wanted to put the Joint Archives, or whatever it was going to be called, in that facility. That almost happened, but at the last moment, the Seminary wanted too much money for rental, and the whole idea fell apart. Then in '83 or so, the planning for this building, the Van Wylen Library, began. It was sort of Elton's last chance to make it happen. He brought it to Gordon Van Wylen and the Board that it was a worthwhile project. At that time, Bill Wichers was still alive and still active, and he and Elton and the people at the Seminary were able to put it together. In its first five years, the Joint Archives
was governed by a joint board of directors. You should ask me later why that's not the case anymore. So I basically had a board of nine people that I reported to and that's who hired me. There were three other candidates--I don't know a lot about them--for the position. I do know that a number of people who were a part of the hiring process had known me as a student and were familiar with the work that I had done as a student at Hope. And I think that at least was helpful in their evaluation. But I'm sure there were many other factors that they weighed.

EB: Why don't you expand a little more on that board. It seems weird that it all of a sudden disintegrated.

LW: Well, it does still exist. Actually, the name of it now is the Joint Archives Advisory Council. We can't really go into that unless we talk about some of the highs and lows of the Joint Archives. One of the heights, of course, is just bringing it together. The fact that three institutions can decide to cooperate, three different institutions, two of them being educational, one of those being a religious educational institution, and then a quasi-public/quasi-private museum which gets, I think, 80 percent of their budget from the city, but is still a separate non-profit. This type of concept has been tried in other places and has failed. So that was great, bringing them into one facility so that individuals could research the material all in one place. So if Ena wants to come in and research any aspect, she doesn't have to go to three different places. And also the fact that each of these three places, with maybe the College being the only exception, could not really afford to staff the Archives. The Museum and the Seminary didn't have the financial capacity to staff it with a professional. By bringing them together,
that brought dollars together, and you could then hire someone like me to do that, and then ultimately have the program grow. That worked very successfully. In our first month, I think we had thirty visitors. That stayed pretty constant over the first couple of years. As we became better known in the community and we really focused heavily on public relations and making the Joint Archives name something that people were aware of in the community, we saw more things come in; we built relationships with the media, so now whenever the media needs information they call us; those kinds of things. That helped a lot. So we got great materials, we got great usage, and pretty much everybody was pretty happy. What we didn't plan on, and what they didn't realize when they set the program up, is the impact that personalities could ultimately play in a cooperative effort. A cooperative effort requires everyone to be cooperative. As long as everyone's cooperative and has a shared understanding of mission and purpose of the organization, you're doing fine. But the minute you bring in an individual who doesn't share that vision, or worse yet, is antithetical to the vision--sort of, "I want all my marbles for myself and nobody else," that's when you run into problems. And we encountered such a personality in Ann Kiewel, who's the current director of the Museum. When she came on board, the dynamics of the Joint Board of Directors changed dramatically, and the collegial, united mission that the Council had shared up to that point, was fractured. That caused a lot of stress. That stress continued from time she arrived on the scene in around 1990/91, until we reorganized the way the Joint Archives is structured in 1994. The way in which we reorganized was that instead of all three of us being in it together with a joint board of
directors and the College serving as the fiscal agent handling the money, we went to
Hope College owning and running the Joint Archives, and then it provides archival
services to the Museum and to the Seminary and now to a couple of other entities by
contract. So the Museum, for example, pays X number of dollars for X services and
that's spelled out in the contract. What that has done is that has made it so I have
basically one boss, and that's the Provost, who I report to, and then we deal
individually with these institutions to meet the contractual obligations that we have. It
simplified matters in many respects. In this case, Ann Kiewel, the Director of the
Museum, her responsibility and her concern relates only to her collection and doesn't
affect the totality of the operation of the Joint Archives as it once did.

EB: When you first were hired, was a lot of organizing your part, or did the board have a
lot to do with that?

LB: The board pretty much left that in my hands. They basically hired me because I was
the professional and I would do those kinds of things. I had a three stage plan that I
set forth before the board even before I came onboard as to what I thought we should
be doing the first several years. As I recall, the very first goal was physical control.
That was bringing the materials into the same place and finding a way to organize it
on the shelves so that we knew at least roughly what we had. The next step was
intellectual control because really these collections were a mess and we didn't have
any abstracts, there were some limited abstracts that had been done by Elton Bruins
and Andy Vander Zee and people who had part-time custodial care, but they weren't
computerized and were very sketchy. They were relatively limited in their
We had a lot of work to do. We started from day one saying we're not going to have a card catalog and we're going to do this all on computer so that it's all searchable. We worked very hard to get that sort of intellectual control, bibliographic control, so that if you came in and wanted stuff on the Holland Fire we could say boom, boom, boom, here are the four collections where you're going to find that stuff. And before 1988 or '89, you couldn't do that. In '89, a year after we started, we published a Guide to the Collections, which was about an inch thick, which, even though wildly out-of-date now, was very much a big step forward at that time ten years ago. So those were the big keys, trying to make sense of this real big mess.

It's very difficult in 1997 to see where the collection is now and how well organized and easy to locate things are and imagine what it was like those first few years. We did that entire work, at least for the first couple or three years, with just myself and four students. There was no secretary. There was no Collections Archivist. The first Collection Archivist came on board, I think, in 1990 as a grant position. The first Collections Archivist was Craig Wright.

EB: Why don't you talk a little bit about how the Archives has changed since you had just those four students to now where you've got it on the World Wide Web, and you have many students and a secretary and...

LW: You're one of them! We've really been blessed. I think we've been blessed for a number of reasons. One, we've had really good support from those key people that had been important--President, Provost, most of the members on the Joint Archives Council. Those outside the Archives, members of the public have been supportive.
We've been able to build the programs incrementally. We started out, of course, with four students, and really that hasn't changed a lot. We've gone between four or five students working part-time through the school year. We do have more full-timers in the summer than we used to. The first big addition was in 1990 when we added the Collections Archivist. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission, NHPRC as it's known, gave us a grant for two years to fund a Collections Archivist to come and help us catalogue, in a more formal way, the collections that we have and do to quite a bit of processing, which was to organize the collections. With just me plus people coming in and doing research and all that other stuff that had to be done, I wasn't able to do a lot of processing and all the work that you and others do today. Craig Wright was our first person, and he worked for us, I think, two or two and half years. We were able to get a grant extension, actually it was a follow-up grant to the first grant, which funded what ultimately became Jenifer Smith Holman's position. She took over after Craig after a six or eight month vacancy. What Craig and Jenifer did is they really catalogued the collection, put them into what's called MARC format, which is a standard bibliographic format. They processed a lot of the collections. A lot of the basic processing to the detail level was a result of those people. Then the addition of Lori Trehewey as our first secretary/receptionist in the beginning of 1996, January, was a big plus. That took a lot of the clerical work that I was doing and gumming up my time with what was really more secretarial in nature and put someone in that position. Those two positions have had the biggest impact on the operation. They have allowed me to focus on growing the Archives, carefully, but still growing
the Archives, in deliberate ways that I couldn't maybe do when all I had to focus on was getting this collection deed out or getting that inventory done and typing this up and typing that up, that sort of thing. We've always had wonderful student staff. We have been able to attract some of the best over the years. Our next step as far as growth probably will relate to the pending addition which we're hoping for, the Reformed Church in America, as a new institutional member. We'll become an official repository for the midwest for the RCA that may result in some staff addition, although that's unclear how much. Then we will have three summer interns help process the Guy Vander Jagt collection which we anticipate next summer.

EB: You've talked about the growth just in the collection itself. How has your adding the World Wide Web—and when did you add the collection to the Web—how has that helped the growth of the Archives?

LW: I think it's really a brave new world, if you will. Our usage numbers have gone steadily up. We started with thirty researchers a month back in 1989 and I think our average is now between 125 and 150 a month, which for an Archives in the state of Michigan probably ranks in the top three or four in usage. The World Wide Web is a common man's access. What I mean by that is up to now when you catalogued an archival collection it went into what's called OCLC, which a library database linked among libraries in the country. But you had to have a librarian search that database in order to find anything. Now that may change, but that's how it is currently. The World Wide Web, anyone can log on to the Web at any point and get into the Joint Archives Web page and search our abstracts and hopefully soon our collection.
registers and everything else. And that's made it so that anyone from their desktop at home can search our collections. I think Geoffrey shared with me recently that we're getting a 100 or 120 hits a months, and we've only had it up on the Web for a few months. So there's a lot of usage. So I see that as being a big reference tool in the future. We surely have challenges. We have challenges with visibility. That's probably our biggest challenge. Being on the lower level of the college library is a visibility problem for us. Members of the public wonder--can they go into the college library; are they allowed to? Even though we're open to the public, that's not always so self-evident. Signage is a little challenging right now for the Archives outside the building. I don't know if I answered your question.

EB: Yes, you did. Why don't you talk a little bit about how the community has interacted with the Archives, and Hope College, since it is in the Hope College Library.

LW: Our largest group of users, we have several I should say, one is the staff of the College and the staff of the Museum. The staff of the College being faculty, staff, and students. We get a lot of usage there. I don't know what the number are; Geoffrey could tell you, but they're a significant group. The Museum staff is another significant group as we provide reference help to them. But another huge chunk is I what I call people interested in local history. That's kind of generally defined, but individuals who are searching on the history of their house or their family, or they want to know a little bit about the 1871 fire, or whatever aspect of the community history that they have. Another big chunk of users for us is the media. We're probably the first place where the local newspapers call to get historical information or
to verify historical information, because that's one of the reasons we exist--as a research center. We added four or five years ago, the subtitle to our institutional name, History Research Center, because that's really what we are. We're a place where people do research on history. An individual can go into the Museum, as a case in point, and they're going to have history interpreted for them. They're going to be able to walk in there, say on Tuesday today, or Thursday next week, or next September, and the interpretive experience will be generally the same. The main gallery doesn't change very much. There's a changing gallery, but you basically learn what they tell you. That's very valuable, very important. But at the Archives, what we do is every visit is a new adventure. So if Ena comes in, for example, one day you could want to research the Great Holland Fire, and you'll be digging here and looking at that, and these photographs and those documents. Tomorrow you want to know about the Pull, and that's going to be a whole different experience with a whole different grouping of materials. So, the type of history that we expose people to, while it requires more work in the part of the user, is much different, and I think ultimately, more useful experience. It surely has more direct usefulness to the visitor.

EB: What are some goals that you see for the Archives in the future?

LW: Slow but steady growth. Growth in our user database, the number of people who come in and the quality of those users. Quality growth in collections; we are feeling the space crunch, so we realize we have to be selective and deliberate in how we grow. But that shouldn't stop us from growing. We want to keep looking outward. We've started an innovative relationship with the Amway Corporation. It's a little
unclear how well that will work out in the long term, but so far that has been working out well, sort of a private/public or private/educational partnership, which is in the theme of the Joint Archives as we sort of look at different ways of doing Archives. That’s probably the most exciting thing about the Joint Archives is that we’re doing things in the profession that other people talk about, or dream about, but they don’t get around to doing. My goal is to try to be entrepreneurial and go out there and try some of these things. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. We know that a joint program can work and can function very effectively. So we try to build on that strength. Bringing in the RCA, the Reformed Church in America, will be a significant addition for us. Ultimately, it would be wonderful to have another archivist or para-professional on staff. I don’t know how realistic that is in the short term, but in the long term I think it’s realistic. So those are sort of interim term goals.

EB: Is there anything else you’d like to add about the Archives that maybe we haven’t covered?

LW: Ultimately—and Geoffrey and I were talking about this the other day—we were talking a little bit about our, sort of, purpose in life, kind of like going through your own senior seminar in conversation. We were talking about why we did what we did, or decided to go into this particular profession. For me, and I think also for him, we decided we wanted to do something that would have some lasting legacy so that when we came to the end of the day or came to the end of the year or came to the end of our careers, we could look back and say, "That was worth doing." Other people
would be able to look at it and say, "That was worth doing." And I think what we do here at the Joint Archives is worth doing. What people remember of this place and this area and the Dutch-American experience and all of those things are going to be highly dependent on what we do on a day-to-day basis, what we collect, what we choose not to collect, and how we help interpret today for the future. And I think that's really important. I think what archivists do nationally is undervalued because the history books we read, the documentaries we watch, the news that we hear, all of it is dependent on historical sources and the key place where that is preserved is in archives.

EB: On a different note, kind of to pry back into your childhood, where did you attend church? Did you attend church? Did you do this on a regular basis?

LW: I was raised in Harderwyk Christian Reformed Church on the north side. It was about three mile from where I grew up. I went there until I was 18 or 19, went off to college and went less frequently. I had limited fores in attending the Methodist Church in college. I went through a phase where I was relatively unattached, which is pretty typical of people who went through that period of time in their life. Surely a period where I did a lot of questioning. My later college years were very much that way, which was important. Senior seminars, which you have yet to experience or will soon, is a time when you sort of look at that, those kinds of issues, and try to bring those home. Then when I came back here, I joined the Reformed Church, Christ Memorial originally, now my wife is on the staff at Second Reformed in Zeeland, so we're there. That was a deliberate choice. I decided to join the Reformed Church in
America because, one, I felt more comfortable in it, and two, because I'm not that conservative, and the other is because the College and the Seminary are affiliated with the RCA. So I felt it was important that the archivist at this institution be affiliated with the Reformed Church in America.

EB: We've talked about your schooling and job, and obviously some point in there you met your wife and were married. When did this happen?

LW: You want the abridged version of my love life here. I was engaged to a woman for a couple of years in the early '90s, but that's not who I married. I met Sarah when she was working at Western Theological Seminary in the library. She took a job there. She was, at that time, 22 or 23. All the single seminary students were asking her out. She joined the staff, I think, in April, and I don't think I even met her until July or August. She will dispute this, but my policy at that time was new people at institutions where we had to work a lot with people there, I would give them a tour of the Archives. I did that for people at the Museum. I did that for people at the Seminary when they came onboard in areas where we had to work a lot with these people. So when she came onboard, and this was like three or four months after she started, I decided, well she ought to have a tour like everybody else. So I invited her to come over for a tour. Well, she took that to mean something more than I meant it to mean. She'll dispute that, but it's true. She came to the Archives dressed to the nines that day for her tour. So, realizing at that point that she had misunderstood what my tour meant, we ultimately did go to dinner. Interestingly enough, we didn't care for each other very much. She was a woman of strong opinion; she still is today.
But she was very much that way that night. Having dinner with her, I kind of walked away from that saying well, that was interesting, and off I go to continue my life. I saw her a couple times after that, but then at the Christmas party for the Seminary, which was in December, I offered to give her a ride to the Seminary party at Marigold Lodge. We hit it off more at that event than we had a couple months earlier. We had e-mailed back and forth a little bit on mostly work related matters, and she was obviously attracted to me and I was to her. We started dating early in 1993 then, so it was late 1992 what I just described. We dated and got engaged in September of '93 and we were married in March of '94. So we dated for about a year and half before we got married.

EB: And you have children too?

LW: Yes, we have two children. We got married in March, and got pregnant in June (chuckles). Sarah was eager to have children and I didn't have strong feelings one way or the other, not knowing what I was getting into. Amy was born on [date removed]. We were married on March twelve of '94 and she was born on [date removed], of '95, [text removed]. Her name was Amy, Amy Imogene. Amy was a just a name we both could settle on and liked. Imogene was her grandmother, who was at that time was still living. She was a beautiful baby girl born in Holland Hospital. I missed the birth by 45 minutes. I was in New York City, and at that time I wasn't flying for various and sundry reasons I won't go into now, but I drove back from New York and missed the birth by 45 minutes. (end of side 1) Lucy was born ten months ago in [date removed], 1996--Lucy Jane. She was
born in Holland Hospital. I was there for her birth. She was actually an emergency C-section because we didn’t realize she was a breech baby. Much different personality than child number one as we found out. We’ve had two girls, don’t know if there will be anymore. My wife is somewhat reluctant at this time to have more children. We have two children in diapers.

EB: That’s understandable.

LW: That’s understandable at this point.

EB: Has that made you recognize or realize, the birth of your children, maybe a generation gap? They’re not quite old enough yet, but have you noticed this in the older children and yourself?

LW: I don’t know. I’ve always related really well to young children. I see more of a gap between me and people in their teens now, which is typical. I’m sure my parents felt that way too. I’m now 35, and when I was 10, 11, 12 years old, my parents were around 50. Of course, they were immigrants. So their experience growing up was so radically different than my experience growing up, there was an added layer of complexity. But I don’t have any problem relating to our small children and hopefully that won’t change too much. It will change because I’m sure that the music and the styles in the 2000s will be different than they are now. That will be a challenge because I’ve had my children a little later in life. I was 34 when Lucy was born. My kids will be getting out of the house as I start thinking about retiring (laughs).

EB: What was home life like living with parents that were Dutch immigrants being in America?
LW: At times a little lonely. I was the distant third child. My nearest brother is almost 7 years older. So I grew up, at least in my later years, as an only child. My parents didn't have a lot of friends. They had a few, but none very close. I think the war experience, surely on my father, left him kind of a loner. He came from a big family with a very domineering mother. So we didn't have a lot of personal interaction. I had some friends in the neighborhood of course, but it was probably not a social experience as other children might have, as I recall it. My mother is a pretty typical strong willed Dutch lady. She still is.

EB: I'm going to assume that English was spoken in the house, but did your parents also speak Dutch?

LW: They did. They were of a generation where they felt that since they'd immigrated to America, they should be teaching English to their children and should speak English in the household. There was also a feeling at that time, as inaccurate as it has turned out to be, that having a bilingual household would confuse the children. That's been borne out as not being accurate but that's the way they felt; and hence, the Dutch that I know was picked up primarily through them interacting with other individuals either of Dutch descent or people visiting from the Netherlands, with their old friends they talked Dutch to. When I was real young, Dutch was used as the language of secrecy. Since we didn't know it, they could talk in Dutch and then we wouldn't know what they were saying. That only worked for so long because we learned some basic Dutch pretty quickly. I have a working conversational knowledge of Dutch. I can converse and understand quite well. That comes from that growing up around the
language but not in the language.

EB: Do you travel to the Netherlands?

LW: I will be next November, which will be my first visit to the Netherlands since 1970. I was there in 1966 and 1970 both as a pretty young child. I have vague memories of 1970, as an eight year-old. So it's been a long time.

EB: Why don't you talk a little bit about the growth in Holland since you were a kid to now.

LW: Holland has grown exponentially since I was a child. The Holland of the early '70s resembles the Holland of the '90s, but so much different. It was a much more conservative town, much more dominated by the Dutch ethnic background. There were Hispanic members of the community, but they didn't have political power and were relatively, I speak relatively, invisible in the community. I am happy to see that has changed. Surely the industrial base was not there. In the mid-'60s there were just a handful of industries. The Holland Furnace Company had already gone bellyup. Holland was doing okay, but it wasn't doing wonderfully. I think several things played into the sort of exponential growth that started in the early '70s. One that is probably terribly underplayed is the connection of the interstate freeway system in Holland in 1974. U.S. 31 as a divided freeway was completed in the '60s to the southside of Holland, and then you had sort of go through the city and get on old Chicago Drive. Then 196 was constructed in the '60s to Grandville, but from Grandville to the southside of Holland there was no freeway. Well in 1974, that freeway opened. I think the completion of U.S. 31 in the '60s and this additional link
in the early '70s was a big spur to commerce in Holland, and played a big part, not
the only part, but a big part in the industrial growth that we started seeing. The fact
the Prince could be so successful was that he could get his goods to the markets in
Detroit very expeditiously as the auto companies had to sort of start fighting for their
lives given the competition. Then all the other industries that came to town. Holland
has doubled or tripled in size since 1970. I think last I saw the metro area, which
would be Holland-Zeeland and the surrounding townships, has something like 120,000
people in it. That's a pretty sizable town. We've seen a lot of retail growth. The
mall opened in 1988; the outlet mall in 1988, all that development along the U.S. 31
corridor, all the housing development on the north side of Holland. The average price
of a house today is what, $125,000? Somewhere in that neighborhood. There's not a
lot of vacant land in the area where I grew up anymore.

EB: Why don't you talk about that vacant land, the changes geographically from trees to
buildings.

LW: Park Township, which is in the area where I grew up, has probably been more
deliberate in wanting to retain a quality residential growth. They don't just level
everything and plop houses wall to wall. They've done a pretty good job, but they're
starting to run out of land to do that with. That's not always so clear in Holland
Township. Holland Township growth has been a little bit, at least from my
perspective, more haphazard. I'm not quite as happy with the planning commission of
Holland Township, looking at how they've decided to zone the land in certain areas,
but that's just a personal opinion. There's just been subdivision after subdivision
growth. And I'm in one of them. I built a house in one of those growing subdivisions near 112th and Riley.

EB: You mentioned the Hispanics that were here while you were growing up. How has the people's view of them changed? How has it grown?

LW: I think there's been a lot of pluses and some minuses. I think sometimes we tend to focus on the minuses, on the negatives, and not on the positives. As Holland has grown, it has brought in a lot of middle management, and a lot of people from out of town. That has enhanced the diversity of the community, not just ethnically, but religiously. I think the point of view is more broad spectrum, more broad minded in the '90s than it ever was in the '60s or the '70s. As it relates to the Hispanic population, which is our largest minority, I think that there is much more tolerance. Surely at the public level there is less discrimination. I am not saying that there is no discrimination, but there is much less. I think if a Hispanic family member, or family, tried to find housing in the mid-1960s, they would have been very limited as to what they could see or what they'd end up being able to rent or own. I don't think you'd find that kind of housing discrimination nearly as prevalent in the 1990s. I'm sure it still does happen occasionally. But while public discrimination has gotten much better, there is surely among certain quarters a very private residual tension. Sometimes I see it as I deal with individuals who donate materials. Of course, they tend to be older, primarily, and they represent an era when hostility or prejudice was more open. But there surely is still some of that in the community and you see that rise to the surface. One of the areas where prejudice tends to flair is around the issue
of language. As any immigration historian will tell you, what Hispanic members of
the community are doing today is no different than what Dutch and Germans and
everybody else did a 100, 150 years ago. When the Dutch first came, they talked
Dutch. They talked Dutch in the household. Their schools were Dutch; their
churches were Dutch; everything was Dutch. Second generation: things may still be
Dutch, but they're moving away. Third generation: they switch entirely to English. I
doubt that the Hispanic population in Holland will be much different than that. They
are in their first and generational cycle right now. The Hispanic community only
starting really taking roots in Holland in the 1950s. You can do your math. You are
really not very far in the generational cycle there. So, there's still a lot first and
surely second generation Hispanics who are in the community and they want to speak
their language. There does not seem to be much tolerance for that. But if these
people were Dutch 125 to 150 years ago, they ran into the same hostility from the
American population in 1847 as the Hispanics now do in 1997.

EB: It's been told and heard that because of this ethnic diversity there has been what some
call "white flight" to the Zeeland/Grand Rapids area from Holland. Have you seen
any of this, and what do you think about this?

LW: Has there been some of that? I'm sure there has. Surely, from the core center city.
We see more crime in the center city, which is more a product of poverty and
disadvantaged circumstances than of ethnicity. It isn't ethnically generated. Poor
people who are disadvantaged tend to have challenges and their children to have
challenges that maybe someone in an affluent suburb may not have as much. There
probably has been some "white flight." I don't think it's been huge. Surely you will see less ethnic diversity in some of the north side neighborhoods than you would in the core city. I think there are certain people who have decided to stay. There certainly is a commitment on the College, for example, through its Walk to Work program to try to reinforce the communities around the College campus by having members of the faculty and staff live there and walk to work, which is a good self-interested but still civically minded concept on the part of the College. I look at the neighborhood where I live and it's really interesting because I live in a new development. Every house that is in my development is less than two years old. And there are more going up all the time. I live on a cul-de-sac with six different families. Right now, they all are caucasian families. But on the street that the cul-de-sac comes off of, there is a Hispanic family; there's an Asian family. Nearby there are two more Hispanic families. There's an ethnically mixed couple, the woman is Asian and the fellow is caucasian. There's a lot of ethnic diversity in the new neighborhood where I'm growing up. There's an African-American family just up the street. So I think that in some of the new neighborhoods that are going up, there's a real good ethnic diversity. But there's tension. We see sort of a microcosm of that. For example, the Asian family lives in a good sized two story home. Among Asian families the extended family all live together in the same place. And that's not the way Europeans live. That's not the way some other ethnic groups live, but that's the way Asian Americans live. So sure enough, there are about eight cars parked outside the house more nights than not. That brings the ire of the people living next door
who don't like to see eight cars parked out in front of the house everyday. It brings some cultural tension. We live with that just in our own little neighborhood.

EB: How has the church, the Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church, played a role in the Holland community and the development of Holland?

LW: You really can't talk about Holland without those two churches. They're still the dominant churches, but not as much as they used to be. But, we probably wouldn't be here if the Dutch hadn't come. We started off in the Reformed Church and then of course the split in 1857 which was really relatively small and then the controversy in the 1880s when the CRC just really sort of took off. It's good to see the two churches talking to each other and working together for the most part--surely in this community. There's going to be a time when those two denominations will probably have to merge. From a theological standpoint, there's virtually no difference. There definitely is differences among the ways the churches operate. But there's also a lot of other influences in Holland. There's two Catholic parishes in Holland; there's now two Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches; there's Presbyterians; there's Pentecostals. All of those have brought, I think, a rich...Holland is still a very religious town, not maybe as much as it used to be. But it's more diverse in its understanding of its spirituality, which I think is really good. Generally those elements work together. I think in the Sesquicentennial that became very evident on church Unity Day. I think with the exception of some right-wing Baptist churches, who never cooperate with anyone, almost all of the denominations came together and supported that Christian Unity Sunday. Of course that didn't bring in other faiths, but frankly, in Holland,
even in the 1990s, there's not a lot of multi-religious—and I'm not saying there are no Moslems or Buddhists in Holland or whatever, but there numbers are pretty small still at this time. That may change.

EB: How does the College and the Seminary play a role in Holland?

LW: Holland wouldn't be what it is today without Hope. I think sometimes that's lost on some—of course now I'm speaking as a member of the faculty and I should say that qualification before I say what I'm going to say—but I think sometimes the community doesn't understand the contributions the college makes, the cultural contributions, the theatre, the music, the HASP program, all of those things that enhance the cultural dimension of the community. It's a good citizen. It keeps up its properties well, it funnels a lot of dollars into the community, both through its students and through its employees. So it has a big financial impact even though its property is tax free there's a lot of other dollars that come into the community. It's had a good relationship with the community and is committed to it. I think it's really had deliberate desire, but also in a self-interested way, to do things that are civically responsible. Taking on the Knickerbocker Theatre surely wasn't the best financial decision the College has ever made. Even though it was donated, it's been a financial loss over the years. But the College felt it was important to have that presence on 8th street. The Haworth Conference Center is a nice addition. Now we have a hotel in downtown Holland after a 30 year absence.

EB: The role of women—how has that changed? You said your mom was...

LW: It has definitely changed and all of the changes have been to the positive. I think of
the opportunities women had when I was growing up, they are a lot better than they were in the fifties, but still not what they are now in the '90s. I think pay rates, while not where they should be--equal to male counterparts--they are better than they used to be in comparison. I don't think there are very many jobs that are closed to woman at this point. The interview that was done recently, that I did actually, with Jessie Dalman, would be good for people to read. She has some great insights on how the role of women has changed. But there are still challenges. There's no women representing the Holland community on the County Commission. The only woman that's ever served in that capacity is Jessie. There is a noticeable underrepresentation of women on the City Council. There is a noticeable lack of women in leadership positions in corporate companies in the Holland community. That's not true in civic organizations, the Arts Council, the Museum, Main Street Holland. There's quite a number of civic organizations that have women in leadership positions. So that's definitely a positive. So I think there's work to be done still, but we've come a long way.

EB: Do you think that lack of women in the city and the corporate roles is due to a conservative city?

LW: It probably historically is true. I'm not sure on a political level that that's too much the case, but it may have a negative impact. Surely, the lack of women in leadership roles in the CRC until just the last couple years has played a role. Historically, the Christian Reformed Church has been, and in the RCA going back in history, have felt that women should be subservient and that's part of the theology in that period. You
can't get around that. But we’ve also seen a lot of growth in a lot of areas around Holland. The generations change, and times change.

EB: Are you involved in any community organizations?

LW: A couple.

EB: Do you want to expand on that?

LW: (laughs) Gosh, I've been involved in quite a number of things. The one that’s probably been most significant recently is working with the Sesquicentennial Committee. The Sesquicentennial Committee got its start first by a letter written by Elton Bruins to the mayor in '94 saying we're three years away, we better get our you-know-whats in gear. That was followed up by a meeting between the Mayor, Jodi Syens who was City Clerk, Ann Kiewel the Director of the Museum, and myself, to sort of talk about how we were going to proceed. Then that ended up in a commission or committee being constituted, which pretty much has stayed to the people that are on it now. It was a commitment that I made that one of my major foci in 1997 was going to be the Sesquicentennial, which meant supporting the publications, doing some of our own publications, helping with the various entities, doing the oral history project which this interview is a part of, which is probably the most important legacy item that we're doing. Basically, doing things that provide a lasting legacy. Since the Archives is in the legacy business, I thought that we ought to do something that people would be able to learn from and use 50, 100, whatever years from now. This project of the 150 oral histories was very much a big part of that. That's taken a lot of our energies this year. I've given up a couple of professional
involvements so I could do that, and it's been very worthwhile and very productive. That doesn't mean I haven't done other things. I've been president of the Historical Society of Michigan since September of '96 and continue through September '98. I serve on a number of boards, state boards and so on. But locally, my big involvement has been the Sesquicentennial Committee.

EB: One of the last few questions I have is who here in Holland has influenced your life?

LW: There are several individuals that have influenced my life. The one who has probably had the most influence, surely professionally, has been Elton Bruins. There's probably not an individual that I could describe as having more integrity and having more forthrightness, honesty, and humility than he does. He was a professor of mine when I was a student. He was the individual who was chair of the committee who hired me. He's been a constant friend and confidant and has given a lot of guidance. I think he's given a lot of leadership. He's given a lot of himself to the community and to the College. He's probably been the biggest influence. Jon Huisken, the Registrar, has been a close friend, a great individual to bounce ideas, concepts off of, to let loose steam with. Those two have been big professional helps. Surely on a personal level, my wife has been very helpful. I'm trying to think of other people. Those are the three individuals that come to mind immediately. I'm sure many others have helped me along the way.

EB: What has been a significant turning point in your life?

LW: There have been several, but probably the most important is the taking of this job. It brought me back to Holland when I was not anticipating returning to this community
in the foreseeable future. There is no doubt that I am very wrapped up into what we do because I think it's important. I think that's been a plus for the program. It surely has been a big change as far as my life. I don't know where I'll be in 10 or 15 years; there may be another turning point in my future that I'm not aware of. But those decisions in 1988 have been a big influence. I met my wife and got married and had children, built a house, did all those things because of those decisions.

EB: Why don't you expand a little bit on what you feel about Holland, your opinion.

LW: I think it works really well as a community. Looking at it as far as it handles its challenges and problems, usually when Holland sets its mind to do something, it gets it done for the most part. Surely that's true in the last 20 years that I'm more conscious of. Whether it's how we're going to deal with crime, with the Weed and Seed, or how we are we going to get people off of welfare through Project Zero, or how are we going to do historical preservation, i.e. Joint Archives. How are we going to make people more aware of the arts? Holland Area Arts Council. How are we going to afford to do X, Y, or Z? We wanted to do a Sesquicentennial so we came up with a hundred and fifty or whatever thousand dollars and we did a lot of different things with the Sesquicentennial. The City Council works pretty well together. The corporate environment and the business community are well coordinated. We have a very strong Chamber of Commerce led by a very able man, Lou Hallacy. Cross-institutionally it works well. I mean the Chamber works well with civic organizations and the city. And we have tension. I mean the Area Center was a good case in point of people not agreeing on what ought to happen, but we'll
get through that and that will end up being somewhere. It will probably be where the mayor wants it, which is a good place, I think, for it, by the way. But there will always be some tension, but I think as a whole the community works really well. I think individuals who come into the community who are primarily self-interested, who really look only out for themselves, have hard time in this community. I can think of some examples of that.

EB: Is there anything you want to expand on or mention that we haven't talked about yet that would benefit somebody down the road?

LW: I don't think so. We've talked about a lot of different kinds of things. There are some things in our future that are going to be turning points, which we have yet to see, which the reader of this interview will know as history. There's going to be a big leadership change here at the College in the next five years as the President, Provost, and Chief of Development all retire. There's some, I think, challenges as far as community growth, that this community is going to have to deal with. Infrastructurally, it's going to have to deal with the burgeoning population. So, there are some challenges ahead. But I think they are exciting challenges.

EB: I guess if there's nothing else that you have to add, we'll conclude.