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

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Interview with Larry J. Wagenaar, "150 Stories for 150 Years"
Interviewed by Greg Olgers for October 18th, 1997 Half time Football Show
Recorded October 10th, 1997 by Ted Nielsen

GO: Good afternoon, and welcome to the WFUR half time show. I'm Greg Olgers, and today we're going to be talking with Larry Wagenaar, Director of the Joint Archives of Holland, about the annual oral history project coordinated by the Archives. The project has a sesquicentennial theme this year, in keeping with Holland's ongoing 150th anniversary celebration. Before we talk about this year's sesquicentennial theme, Larry, why don't we begin with what the oral history project is. First, what is an oral history?

LW: An oral history very much is a guided conversation. It's an opportunity for us to sit down with individuals and sort of get inside their head. As it says, it's an oral history; it's an opportunity for us to sit down with a tape recorder in an informal setting and try to get first hand memories from individuals that we would never have access to otherwise.

GO: How is an oral history collected and made a record?

LW: We start with a rather involved process on our part. We develop a set of questions, so that we can ask similar questions over the course of a number of individuals, so we can do some compare and contrasting. We do a pre-interview, which is usually just a very brief phone call or a form that we ask an interviewee to fill out. We then go out into the field and do the interview which, of course, is the most important part in that series. But even more over-reaching in its long term impact, is the transcription of that interview, so that an individual, fifty years, a hundred years from now, long after

the audiotape has disintegrated, can still benefit from the information that people are telling us.

GO: You touched on this a little earlier, but what do we get that we wouldn't get another way through things like official records, newspaper cuts, and so on?

LW: I think we get in oral history, what I would call flavor. We also get additional information that isn't in the written record. Usually when people prepare a written paper or a book there are a lot of things they leave out for a variety of reasons. In an oral history, we're able to get a lot of that flavor. So we really get a sense of what the times were like that these individuals lived through.

GO: How long has the project been around at Hope? What are some of the past themes?

LW: The last several years we've been focusing on different immigrant communities. We've of course focused on the large Dutch population, we've focused on the Hispanic population, on the Asian population. We've also done things like Macatawa Park history, the history of Tulip Time, for example. The project has been around Hope College since 1977. It started out of the history department. Dr. Elton Bruins ran the project out of his office in the religion department for quite a number of years, before the Joint Archives of Holland took it over around 1990.

GO: How common is it for organizations to try to collect oral histories like the Archives does, and for that matter, who else does it?

LW: You do see it in other archival organizations and sometimes in museum settings. It's relatively uncommon, but becoming more common than it used to be. People are realizing there is a lot of history out there that we really ought to be recording. Of

course, there is also a millennial feeling that's starting to percolate. You may have noticed it recently that Mrs. Clinton is going to support a millennial oral history type project in the coming months and years.

GO: Let's get back to this year's theme. You're collecting 150 oral histories for Holland's 150th anniversary. Who or what sorts of stories have you been collecting?

LW: Really a wide cross section. We want to talk to elderly individuals, who lived a long time in our community with many memories. We're also trying to talk to some young people because their perspective is significantly different. We'd like to talk to a wide cross section as far as ethnicity is concerned, so we're talking to Hispanics, Asians, and African-Americans, as well as to the majority caucasian population. We're also trying to talk to people who have left town. That's a much harder and more difficult thing to get done. So we're not simply trying to sugar coat the history. We're trying to document the full, wide color range of the rich history of Holland and its environs.

GO: How did you choose the people to interview?

LW: It came through nominations. We sent out nominations forms to a lot of places and people here in the community, asking people to nominate individuals they felt would contribute. Some of it has been targeted nomination on the part of our staff, because we know there are certain people who we would really like to talk to. That's pretty much how we've done it.

GO: When you do a project like this and the stories start coming in, do you ever have a sense of, "Wow, I'm really glad we got that one"?

LW: Almost every time, Greg. When we sit down with an individual, we're really getting

a candid history from their point of view and their particular life experience. Not everyone, but nearly everyone we're discovering information that we didn't know before.

GO: You talk about discovering new information. Do you ever wind up with, for lack of a better word, any surprises?

LW: There are surprises from time to time, and usually that results from the unique opportunity in an oral history for candor. Normally, as I said before, when people prepare a written history, it's very crafted, things are removed. In an oral history, it's a conversation, much like you and I are having here today. It's a guided one, but it's still a conversation. Things come up that you don't expect, and leads that you are able to follow up on that you weren't anticipating you would encounter.

GO: I think of sitting down and doing the interview, then transcribing the tape. One hundred and fifty histories sound like a lot. How does this year's project compare in scope to the others?

LW: It is significantly more massive, from our point of view. Normally in a summer which runs from May through August, about three and a half months, we do in the order of fifteen to twenty interviews, complete from the time we do the questioning all the way through the transcription phase. One hundred and fifty is significantly more than fifteen to twenty. So you can sort of get a sense for how much effort has been involved. We have utilized volunteer interviewers on this project, because of its scope, as well as the hired Hope College student that we use during the summer.

GO: What sort of time frame are you working with? You mentioned the larger scope. So

when are you hoping to have all one hundred and fifty done and transcribed?

LW: We will have all of the interviews done by December 31st. They will not all be transcribed, although I think you'd be amazed at the number we have completed. Ann Paeth was our student coordinator during this summer. Tracy Bednarick last summer in '96 when we started the project, and Marie Zingle was the individual who helped us with the volunteer portion of the project. I believe, as of today, we have nearly one hundred and thirty completed as far as being interviewed. Of them, almost one hundred are fully transcribed. That leaves us with twenty to complete before the end of the year. So we're very hopeful, and I'm certain that we'll have them all done.

GO: That's great, and a great record too of life in Holland. Thank you, Larry, for being with us today, and talking about the sesquicentennial oral history project. Now let's get back to the game.