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Wilburn, Alta Oral History Interview:
Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Alta Wilburn

Conducted May 16, 1997
by Larry Wagenaar

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LW: Why don't we just start out, if we could, if you're willing to, with your date of birth.

ALW: With my date of birth? Oh, I would love that. I'm going to be 85 Saturday. May 24, 1912.

LW: So it's almost your birthday. Well, happy birthday.

ALW: Yes. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

LW: First some background. Tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

ALW: All right. I was born in Wichita, Kansas. We lived there until I was, I guess, four years old. Then we moved to Lawrence, Kansas. That's where I was until I was grown. I grew up there. I went to school in Lawrence, Kansas. Finished high school in Lawrence, Kansas and that's as far as I went. I never had any formal education. Our father left us, and that was one thing: he left five children. Of course, we had a hard-working, dedicated mother which we buried, it will be two years in December at the age of 105. She was very alert until then, too. I live with my sister in Kansas City, Missouri, now.

LW: Did you take a job right out of high school then to help support the family?

ALW: No, I didn't. Our mother, she wanted us to learn to kind of support ourselves, take care of ourselves. I had a brother, older, and then I was born and then there was another boy and my sister and a younger brother. This is our sister-in-law. I guess you didn't meet her, did you?
LW: Well, she was sitting over there so...

ALW: Oh, she was. This is Mrs. Waters.

LW: Tell me about your first job. What did you do after you graduated from high school?

ALW: I worked in a private family. I'm going to have to think about that, too, because, as I said, we worked but ours was by word of mouth. We got jobs in private homes and we did a lot of baby sitting, my sister and I. In fact, we baby sat all through high school. That was our main thing. We were always taught, you make enough money to buy your first school shoes and your books for the beginning of school. Your fees, if there are any, from then on our mother felt that she would have it. But I worked mostly after school jobs in private homes. It would be like, go and wash up the dishes that were left, maybe peel potatoes or something like that and a little dusting around. That went on for years. My first regular job, if I can think back that far, was I worked in a beauty salon, I think. I was a maid of all work there. You did everything, repaired the nails, blowed the curls and recurled and whatever. I wasn't supposed to, but I did do that. Oh, I was married in '36.

LW: Your husband's name?

ALW: Byron Wilburn.

LW: What was your maiden name? I should have asked you that.

ALW: Waters. We had no children, and that's the reason, I think, why my sister and I both fool with children because we had no children but we loved children and we never did have any children ever. So we've always fooled with children and that's the way it came about, and we did a lot of baby sitting and baby playing and it was fun. That
was fun and therefore that was one of the reasons mostly why we got the jobs that we got.

LW: Were you married in Kansas?

ALW: Yes, I was married in Kansas.

LW: How long were you in Kansas? When did you move?

ALW: When did I leave Kansas? Well, I was married in Kansas, and we stayed in Kansas until '40 something. I'd have to think about that. But my husband was not in the service. He worked in the shoe department in the military. He worked there. Then later on he was inducted and we lived in Junction City, then. Then he was inducted into the service and I went back to Lawrence, and then he was sent overseas and we stayed there. He was in the service nearly three years and he came back and we stayed in Lawrence and then we were divorced. It's been fifty years almost. I went to work then in the University of Kansas preschool nursery, and that's where I met the VanderWerfs. Their two oldest girls were in the school. Then I developed problem skin or something, and I had to give up the job, and Mrs. VanderWerf called me and asked me...

LW: Where were you working at that time? I'm sorry.

ALW: At Lawrence, Kansas, at the preschool nursery. University of Kansas had a preschool nursery, and those children were enrolled in the school there. I finally had to give up the job in preschool, and she asked me if I would come and do some baby sitting and I told, "Oh no, I don't think so. I don't have patience now." I had to wear rubber gloves and the doctors were working with me and everything and she
said, "Oh, I think you'll be all right. Why don't you come out and look at us?" So I went a couple of times. She said, "If you would just do a little baby sitting," and it ended up a full-time baby sitting job, and I became a nanny, even to the children, they said this. It was very interesting.

LW: What were some of the kinds of things you did for them in the years in Kansas? He was dean at that time, right?

ALW: He was chairperson of the chemistry. What kinds of things did I do for them? Well, don't ask me what kind of things I did for them. Ask me the things I didn't do for them.

LW: Well, that's fine. What things didn't you do for them?

ALW: Well, the first thing that happened was Marta, the youngest, was a rocky, walky, baby talky, and that was about not quite two, I guess. He wanted her to go with him because he did some traveling and she asked me if I would be willing to stay with the children. I said, "Oh yes. It's all right with me. I'd love it!" So she says, "Well, we'll be gone about ten days and will you come and stay with the children?" I said, "Yes." So I packed my bag and I moved in with the children for ten days, and I'd never done that for six children. But, there's one thing about the VanderWerf's that I don't think a lot of people understand. They are, as you know from learning about Dr. VanderWerf, very intelligent, well educated and human, and that's one of the most important things. We have always learned that sort of thing. Our mother taught us those sort of things. You really don't have to just work for anybody. Because you can go out and be a street sweeper. Don't be just a street sweeper, be the best.
You don't have to be that kind where they can wipe their feet on you or anything like that, you don't fool with those kind of people. So I moved in and stayed with the children for about ten days, and they were gone. That was fun. They were really family-oriented to each other. But very, very loving children and, of course, I never had any trouble with them, but I always instilled my mother's common sense and horse sense into them. That's not what they would always get from the VanderWerfs because the VanderWerfs were very well educated and knew everything, mostly, and that's what they taught. So they went along with my program and put it in with theirs, I thought. But no, this is really true. Our mother always told us, "I don't care how many degrees you get. Now, you may go to college and get all the PhD's you want, but unless you have mother-wit, common sense, and horse sense you just ain't got enough, so you take it all with you. Good manners is an asset. Bad manners reflect..." This is what we grew up on, and so this is what I used when I went to the VanderWerfs.

LW: So you stayed for ten days and then it kept going after that?

ALW: And it kept going, and it kept going. Yes. They were in Lawrence, and when he came to Hope in '62, yes, I think that's right, when he came to Hope... When they were getting ready and I was alone then, she said, "Oh please go with us, please. If you'll just go for two months or maybe three months." I said, "I've got that little old house and all that junk." I said, "Heavens, I don't want to lock it up and just leave." My mother and step-father were living then and I didn't want them to have the responsibility. So she said, "Well, come and give us a try. Stay long enough for us
to find someone to take care of the children and do like you do. You can come back." Well, I pondered over that for a long time. I prayed over that. Now, I really did. I thought, "Oh Lord, I can't just leave this little house and leave that responsibility." God said, "Well, chuck the junk and go for an indefinite stay." I thought, my goodness! So I got myself together with my way to work. I said, "I'm going for an indefinite stay." He was still there when I walked in and I said, "Oh, I'm so glad you're still here Dr. VanderWerf because I want you folks to know I've made up my mind to go with you, and I'm going for an indefinite stay." "Ho! We don't want to influence you. We don't want you... What are you going to do? What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to put my house up for rent, put the stuff I want in storage and get rid of the rest." They said, "All right." I had to move out of my house because I had to rent it. Somebody wanted it so badly. So I moved in with my mother and dad and they said, "But we'll send the van over for the things you want to take because we're going to get you an apartment. Well, you put them in the back of the truck because we've got our things to put in yet," and that's the way we left Lawrence and came to Holland.

LW: So you all came together.

ALW: We all came together. But, before we left, of course, Dr. VanderWerf said, "Well, it's not fair for you to give up your house and go with us. We'll find you a place to live." When they wrote the letters and told them that I was coming and they wanted a place near the campus, on the campus, whatever, and find a place so she can live. That's of course when the fireworks started. Did you know that?
LW: Tell me a little bit about the fireworks.

ALW: Do you know anything about it?

LW: I have a sense. I don’t know a lot about it. But tell me about it.

ALW: Well, they wrote and told him to find me a place and they wrote back, I don’t know who they were, but I do know this, because there’s one thing about it… You know, to be above board and to be honest about anything… They would say, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, please come and read this. You won’t believe it. Look at this!" The letters were there. Now I didn’t save any of those letters, but: "We’ve never had colored in the town and we don’t want any now."

LW: These were people from the college?

ALW: No, no. These were the town people. I thought, "I can hardly wait to get there! What manner of people are those?" Now, had I been going south, you know you hear a lot about different things, but had I been going to the deep south I might have thought about it, but I would have gone anyway. I thought, "My, my, my. What’s wrong with those people? I’m not going to overthrow the town! I’m just going with the job. I’m not even asking for a position. Just a job."

LW: So there were quite a few of these letters that said…

ALW: Oh, there were several. Then when you meet a few of the people that were instigators of the plan that were ready to control me and keep me under their thumb and, "We can control her. We don’t have to worry. She’s only one." I thought, "Oh brother, I can’t believe those people!"

LW: So they would say that to your face? That you’re just one, I mean that’s the kind of
thing they would say to you when you encountered these people?

ALW: Oh yes. Yes. One man was a minister, here in this town. He said, "I was one of the men in that organization that was going to control you." Why, I tell you, I thought, "A minister?" He said, "Yes, I was one of them..." But that was all over. You see, there's so much in that. Because by then, they were in the process of organizing the Human Relations organization. This day I don't know how they do it, but the man came from Detroit to do that. You no doubt know about that. You've got to have a certain different nationalities in the organization. As they said, "Well, if you have a lot of Mexican-Americans here, you've got to have one of those in the organization, you've got to have a black in the organization," and I was the black. What an event. I decided that I really wasn't the only one. We've got to have that, and you need a doctor, a lawyer, a statesman, a teacher, whatever, in the organization. I think there were twelve. I enjoyed it, even though it was like that.

One night when they were having a meeting and they were going to organize and get the president or chairperson, I think David, I can't remember David's last name, but I believe he was in the history department at Hope, and he was chairperson. Of course, I had walked in that night and I had said to him, "You know, they're going to have the Tulip Festival, and I think we should really have a float." He said, "I thought of that, and why don't you chair that?" I said, "I can't think of anything I would rather do. I'd love it." I know nothing about making a float. I know absolutely nothing and he said, "Well, okay, you have a job." He said, "Now we'll get a committee when we meet this evening." Which I thought was very nice,
because the committee was the one who did the work. I didn’t do anything. (laughs) But it was really an experience, and I enjoyed it very much. When you have a float you have to register your float with the Tulip Time Committee and then there’s something else you have to do. I went to see three men in this town and one of the men, when I went to his office to talk about the float, he’s from the city or something, and I walked in and I asked (I can’t even remember his name) for him. She said, "Well, he’s busy right now, but I’ll tell him." So after a while he came out. "You want to see me?" That’s the way he invited me in.

LW: Just by a hand gesture.

ALW: Yes. So I got up and I said, "Do you always invite people into your office like that?"

Of course, he didn’t know what I wanted because they had never had anything like that, I guess. I got up and went with him and he said, "Oh my goodness. This is city business. You don’t do this and you don’t..." I said, "Well, this is what they told me I was supposed to do. I’m the chairperson." So I went on with him and we got that signed up.

LW: So what did he say to you? He didn’t want you to have a float, obviously.

ALW: He didn’t care. I guess he couldn’t say no. I don’t know. But the only thing I learned, I did learn an awful lot. It was a challenge and I did what they told me I had to do. That the fringe was supposed to be so deep and so far off the ground and it should be so many feet long and all those different things. Then they gave me a book where I could find all of what was needed. The committee did all of that. I think I have a snapshot at home and.
LW: Did you ride on the float when it was then?

ALW: No. I didn't ride on the float. Have you ever heard of Elsie Lamb?

LW: Yes, I don't know her well but I know who she is.

ALW: Her husband, Bill?

LW: He was the mayor at one time.

ALW: Well, Elsie was a very, very strong person and she was a help. So she said, "Why don't we name our float, "Let's Be Friends," so that's what we did. She said, "I'll go to the art department at the high school and get some students to make the letters." That was fine. On the float, Marte is the youngest VanderWerf child, and she came to me and she said, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, please let me ride on your float!" I said, "Sweetheart, if we can we'll work that out. We'll see." Oh, that was just great! So we had Dutch and we had some of the college... there was a couple here from Argentina, I believe, and they had two children. But these children all wore their native dress, and by then I had made friends with a family... What is it... Ottawa...

LW: West Ottawa High School?

ALW: Yes. Well, I'd gone out there and taken a ceramic course, and they told me that there was a black family down the street and not too far. I made friends with them, and they had some small children. So we got two black children out there and, oh, we must have had about eight or ten kids on there. You see the two Dutch, the two black children, Argentine, the Mexican-Americans. I don't remember the others but we did. That was the theme, "Let's Be Friends," and they were all on the float in their native dress, whatever they wanted, and if they didn't we put them in Dutch
clothes. We saw to that and, of course, the parents. There was a family here that had adopted two Alaskan Indian children, I believe? We had them on the float and it was my duty to be down at the park to be responsible for the children, got them on the float where they were supposed to stand, and then I had to go clear around on down. But I did no work at the VanderWerfs at all. Well, I have to admit that I did work every day all day, but it was mostly with the children and for the children, because they had the maintenance crew, the men and the women that take care of the house and do those sort of things. So it was my duty to get those children on that float and walk the whole round to where they got off and be there and account for all of them. So I did that and I liked that.

LW: What kind of reaction did you get to the float, do you remember? Very positive, very negative?

ALW: I thought it was positive. There was some people that... Because, I would make it my business to get in a group when it would come, and I will always remember the ladies saying, "Oh, daddy, look at this! Please look at this. We've been coming to this for years and we have never seen a float like this." I said, "Where are you from?" They were from, I'm not sure where... but they were not from anywhere around here, but they came every year for the Tulip Festival and that was what they did for the float. I thought that was very nice. Then, of course, Human Relations and all and the one man that said, that would come from Detroit, he said, "Now, we don't deal with little petty things, but we do handle important cases, and, of course, being the only the black right away, you know, I thought, well I'm not going to have
any petty things because I feel that I can handle my own petty things, you know. I
didn't need that. But there was a family and they wanted to buy a home. I'm not
calling names but they were in Zeeland. The man didn't want to finance them at the
bank where they had their money.

LW: These are African-Americans?

ALW: These were black people. They talked to them. They were very upset and she said, I
told him to go to that bank and draw out that one bank account that they had saved
and she said he did and she laughed. She said, "I thought about that and I told him to
go back and draw out every penny we had." So I asked them. I said, "May I take
this to the Human Relations?" She said, "Yes." They didn't want them to buy the
house and I said, "Well, if you don't want me to, I won't but if you do, you'll have
to be there to give me support." She said, "No." She said her husband would go and
tell them what they said and she said, "If they say they didn't I will come and I will
verify." I said, "That's all I need," because that is not a petty case. They wanted to
buy a home.

LW: What had they told him? They flat out said, we don't finance to black people?

ALW: No. They told him that he didn't make that much money and he couldn't. They
went on his job because he worked, well...

LW: He could have done it. It's just that they told him...

ALW: Well, they were people that probably had the same problem but then they were but...
Yes, he could! They told him, sure he can, and let him finance that, he's all right.
But they didn't want to, so they drew out all of their money. I don't know what they
did with that but anyway they got a house. They did buy a house in Zeeland, and I said, "Well, now, I didn’t think that was petty." But I never heard any more from it, but they got a house. I went to the bank, I had ten cents in the bank, and I said to them, I said, "I’ve got ten cents in that bank and I’m going to go down there and draw my money out, too." Elsie Lamb, she said, "Oh they don’t give you anything on ten cents and they don’t care about that." I said, "That is petty, isn’t it. But you know what? I’m going to that bank and I’m going to leave that ten cents in there, and I’m going to the back door, because she parked in the back and you walked clear across, I did, to the front teller, when I would go and I said, "I’m going to speak to everybody there and go right on just like I owned part of the bank." I would go to the bank, and no one would look up.

LW: Really?

ALW: Oh, I could see, you know, no one would look up and I thought, "Sad, I’m sorry for you, but I am one of God’s great creations and I’m not going to let you..." But I stayed there at the bank. I’ll throw this in. My mother came. Dr. Van would say, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, Tulip Time, don’t you think Grandma Newman would love this?" I said, "I think she would." He said, "You tell her to get ready because her ticket will be waiting for her" So mom said, "Oh I’ll come." "Oh", she said when she got here, "I got a check," and she said I should have cashed it. I said, I’ll take you to the bank. So I went in this door clear through, no body ever looked up, not one of them ever spoke, and I really felt sorry for them. I said, "Don’t worry about it. Now, you can control me, so you do it." I told her, I said, "My mother has a
small check," and I said, "How much will you charge her to cash it?" "Oh!" she says, "We wouldn't think of it. Mrs. Wilburn! Oh!" she said, "Mrs. Wilburn is one of our own, and we would never think of charging her any, and she is our friend."

Mom said, "Hmmm! When did you get to be such friends? I thought you were having kind of a hard time here?" I said, "I didn't know that. I'm glad you came!"

LW: Did they get warmer after she was here. (laughs) Did they stay friendly after that one encounter? The bank? The next time you were in there?

ALW: They didn't stay too friendly. But I had to tell them that I don't care, I don't care what you do to me, I'm ready, if you want to drag me through the streets of Holland by my tongue, and I will not be able to say anything or defend myself. You are free to do it. I wouldn't fight back if I could, because, after all, God is great and I am one of God's great creations, and, after all, so are you. Now I was created from what, I don't know, I'm still wondering today... at 85!

LW: Well, you've had a lot of impact on a number of people.

ALW: Well, I don't know about that, but I've had a lot of fun.

LW: This bank was here in town? Right down town here?

ALW: Yes. Right down town. That's another thing. When they had the meetings, you know, and I said the preacher was there? I call him "the preacher."

LW: Was this the Human Relations...?

ALW: Yes, and that night... I lived right over here, of course, all of those houses are gone, and I'd walk down through the park and everybody stopped me that evening. Everybody seemed to want to talk. They always talk. I tell you, people talked and
said things, not because they wanted to be friendly, but to see how I felt. They were always ready to ask me different questions such as, don’t you ever get lonesome? You seem to go along, and you sing and you hum. That’s one of my worst faults, and I will sing loud. In fact, as I was getting ready to come and the letters were coming, I was telling my family and my sister said, "Oh babe", she said, "I think you’re going to be all right. But please don’t go there with that loud opera singing you do, because they’ll throw you out of the town. Now you go ahead and sing." So I went back and told Mrs. VanderWerf, and they kept asking me, "Well, do any of your family worry about you?" I said, "Oh no," I said, "Teeny said, 'Go on and don’t sing loud.'" Mrs. VanderWerf says, "You sing as loud as you want to, Mrs. Wilburn. Don’t worry about it." So I did. They went back and told the VanderWerfs, "Mrs. Wilburn won’t even speak to us. Why, she just walks all over us and just hums and just sings." So Dr. and Mrs. VanderWerf came in one day and they said, "Now, Mrs. Wilburn, we don’t like that at all, and now we think you should at least speak to the people." I said, "Oh! Really? So the ladies are getting restless! My, my, my!" That’s all I said, and I began to speak. Because I thought, if they don’t want me and I have no business in the town then they don’t need to speak to me. I just left it alone. Because they had already told me I couldn’t go to church here because there were no black churches here.

LW: Is that what they said? Is that what one letter said or did someone actually...

ALW: Somebody actually said that to me. Well, they didn’t actually say that. They said, "Why would you be here. There are no black churches?" I said, "Oh?" I just left it
LW: Did you go to church somewhere in town or?

ALW: Well we came, the van didn’t come. Dr. VanderWerf had a sister that lived in St. Joe. So we stopped there and would drive over every day and work in the house and do things. The van came on a Saturday morning. The man said, "We don’t unload, we don’t work on Saturday but we will be here early Monday morning." Mrs. VanderWerf said, "Oh, if you’ll just unload enough so we can go to church, change our clothes and have a change of clothes." His sister and her husband were living in St. Joe then, and they said, "Oh well then, why don’t you all come and go to church and then we’ll go to dinner together." Well, I’d heard about St. Joseph. You know St. Joseph? It’s kind of an upbeat… It used to be, I don’t know what it is today, and lily white?

LW: Yeah. There are two communities there. One is very African-American; the other is quite Caucasian… especially in that time frame, I would think.

ALW: Okay. So I said to Mrs. VanderWerf, "Well you folks go off now. Don’t wait for me. I won’t go." She says, "What are you going to do? You don’t know a soul here and what are you going to do?" I said, "I don’t know but I’ve been with you folks ten days and ten nights and I don’t think that’s fair. If I’m going to live here I’m going to have to… I’m not a lonely type person. I can entertain myself. Don’t come over and ask if I’m all right or anything. Just go." So, they left, and I went over to see what I could find to eat because we didn’t go to the store, and when I went over I met this elderly couple and he was not well and she said, "We heard you
were coming and we’re glad you’re here! What are you doing?” I said, "Please, God. I’m going to tell this lie but I need help." He said, "Well, tell her you would go to church but they start early here, and in the summertime I learned that they started eight, eight-thirty and everybody locks up the churches and goes to the lake Sunday afternoon. She says, "I’ll tell you a church where you can go and you can walk." That’s when I went to Hope Church. I went in, got myself together and she said, "You’ll be passing where we live." There was an apartment on the end of that. So I went, and she told me which way to go and I went to church. When I got there, of course, the greeters were out, nothing but men and tall, big men and I thought, "Oh brother, they’ve got them all out there waiting to halt me!" So I walked up and told them. "We’re so glad you came!" They escorted me in and seated me by this lady and her little boy and it was really very obvious. She grabbed her child and pulled him over and looked at me and I looked at her and they were singing (sings) "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." I said, "Ah Hah! Christian love." I dusted my dress off and brushed the seat off and looked at her and (sings) "Christian love." She looked at me as if to say I don’t know what it is but he tries to sing. So anyway, when church was out, I was walking out, and this lady came and took me by the hand. Right here on the campus. Did you ever know of a Mary Tellman? She was a head resident in one of the girls’ dorms and she said, "I don’t know your name, I don’t know who you are or anything," she said, "but I think I do." She said, "Take my hand and follow me." We went out and then we talked and we got acquainted and she said, "Well, I’ll tell you what. I’m going to take you for a ride through the
town, and is there anything else you would like?" I said, "Yes, I would like a paper. I like a paper." So she said, "I know just the place to take you. By the way, have you had coffee?" I said, "No, I haven't had coffee but that's all right." She said, "We'll go and get some coffee." So we went to this drugstore down town, you know the drugstore where they're just like that on Sunday mornings? That's where we went! We walked in and when they cleared two seats she said, "We'll sit here," so we sit there and you know you feel... Well, you wouldn't, that sudden hush, as if to say, "What is it?" So I just smiled at them and went on about my business and they served us coffee and I bought my papers and we left there and took a little short ride. She said, "I would take you to dinner but I'm invited out. I said, "I appreciate what you have done." She said, "But I'll be seeing a lot of you." So I thanked her.

Monday morning when I went across the street to go to work Mrs. Vanderwerf said, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, how could you do it. We didn't want you to do that." I said, "Do what?" "You went to church!" "Yeah. I just walked in the door." I said, "How did you know?" She said, "Well, I know you went to church and we didn't want you to do that. We wanted to introduce you." I said, "Oh, I don't need to be introduced. They don't want to know me anyway. Why worry about that, you know." But Mary Tellman really proved to be a tried and true friend. Now I found several friends, I would think. I found several people, or either, they found me and became very good friends because Mary Tellman, and did you ever know Eva B. Van Schaack. Well, anyway, Eva was on the faculty and she was Dr. Eva B. Van Schaak and she would so very often say, "Alta, they don't really think that much of me,"
she said, "But I have got a PhD, I want you to know." I said, "I found out," I said, 
"that man called you Dr. Van Schaaf(?)" I didn’t know that but I would drive her car
because she was a diabetic, and do things for her and with her. I thought that was
very nice.

LW: So did you keep going to Hope Church after that?

ALW: Yes. I kept going to Hope Church. That was the church, of course, the Vanderwerfs
joined. I went to different churches sometimes. In fact, it was Christian Reformed
on the corner. This was Christian Reformed, not Reformed. I learned that. If
you’re Reformed... Are you Reformed or Christian Reformed?

LW: I’m Reformed. I was raised Christian Reformed but I’m Reformed now.

ALW: Why did you go to Reformed?

LW: A number of reasons but for me it was a much better fit.

ALW: Oh. Well anyway, as I learned, you can’t be either one but, then, we’ll let you come
in, because Christian Reformed I understand, oh if they’re going to die they’ll go to
heaven and they’ll walk right in. You’ll have not trouble. If your Christian
Reformed you might have to knock at the door, and of course if you go there you
won’t get in at all! I thought that was interesting, but anyway I went.

LW: You went to the white church on the corner. That’s Pillar church now. It’s called
Pillar Church. Back then it was called Ninth Street Christian Reformed.

ALW: But, no. I didn’t join anything, but Ruth De Wolfe was a missionary and she said,
"O, heck, why don’t you come and go to my church circle," she said, "I think it
would be just the perfect circle for you, because we are on the faculty, some of us,
and we are the business ladies and we have jobs. It would fit your schedule just fine." Because mine was a nine to five job, which I did, so then they asked me to join the circle and I said, "Well, I’ll have to talk to the minister", I said, "I don’t want to just do something and then say well you did the wrong thing." Did you ever know a Hillegonds? Hillegonds was the minister, and he said, "Well, they told me that just the other day!" I said, "Well, I didn’t know whether I could join the circle or not but," I said, "I’m not going to join the church. Not that I think the Baptists are better or anything, but I don’t know enough about the Baptists at all to say that I am a pure Baptist and I don’t have to worry about anything. I don’t think that I should do that." He said, "Well, you just join the circle if you want to." I said, "Okay how far can I go?" He said, "You go as far as you want to but I’ll tell you when to stop and then you will stop because you can’t do a lot of things not being a member." I said, "All right. Thank you." I said, "I think that’s all I need because why would I jump up and join a church here and if I leave here there won’t be any Reformed Church... I don’t know of any black Reformed Churches, well not where I would be going." So he said, "Well that’s alright," so that’s what I did.

LW: So you kept going to Hope Church but you didn’t officially join the church.

ALW: No, I didn’t and there was a family there and she did work with the poor and the needy and she taught sewing, so she asked me if I would come and do that, which I sewed. I did alterations and made clothes and everything else for the Vanderwerf children, so she said, "Maybe you’d like to do it for Hope Church." I said, "Fine with me," and of course Dr. Vanderwerf was very nice and said, "Mrs. Wilburn,
there’s a car at your disposal. When you need or want to do something, just let us know." That’s the way I worked it. Like I said, I took a ceramic class out at West Ottawa.

LW: A while back you were talking about the Human Relations Commission and you were talking about the "important things" versus the "petty things." Tell me a little bit, or a couple of stories of some of the petty things you ran into as you were around town, that you only had to deal with because you were black.

ALW: As I said when I sat next to a minister and he said he was the one who said he was going to control me. He was one of them that was on that committee and he said that, "Well, we heard that you were coming. I was one of those men and we said we can control her so we don’t have to worry." I shook my finger in his face and (tape ends)

LW: So you were shaking the finger.

ALW: I told him, "Don’t ever do that, think you can control me. Because if you do, God will take over." So he said, "But I wanted you to know that I was one of the men on that committee." I said, "And a minister." He said, "I tell you, I was on the golf course, and this minister came in with his black friend, and he had a meeting but could his friend finish playing golf with him?" We told him, "Yes." The minister went to the meeting and his black friend put a dime down, picked up his ball, to keep the spot where his ball was, I don’t know nothing about golf even though we do have a Tiger Woods as everyone seems to think. "Oh, he’s a Tiger Woods, you know, you know him." "No, I only know ___." He said, "I picked up the black man’s
dime and put it in my pocket." He said, "I don't care what I have on," he said, "but I didn't give the dime back to him." He said, "It is worrying me to death, almost. Every time I put my right hand in my pocket." I said, you've got to be kidding, do you know what they said about the eternal dime? I don't know if they said something about damnation and the eternal dime. But anyway, now that was the one thing. Of course, they didn't like my attitude. They didn't think that I should be like I was. I should be more, I guess, head-hung, feet dragging, but we were taught, "Walk tall, look people in the eye, and be yourself. You don't have to be like that." But all of these things our mother taught us. You talk about mother making common sense, oh no, we had to learn. "Don't cry wolf what ever you do! Now he's getting ready to sink his fangs and you think you need help, holler, but if you don't, don't holler."

We were always taught that.

LW: So the minister had a change of heart. The minister after he got to know you he had a change of heart?

ALW: I don't know whether he had it or not. I'm not sure he ever had it.

LW: Was he a Christian Reformed minister?

ALW: Oh, he was Christian Reformed. I stopped at a grocery store where we never shopped out that way someplace. In the grocery store every place you just meet so many things, and you just have to laugh at it.

LW: They don't want to serve you, they don't want to help you?

ALW: Well, they're all right, but then, you have no business here is the attitude they sort of take. I was in this grocery store, but I was in a hurry, and I'd never been in that
store but I had to get home because, I thought, what if the children are there before I get there and I'm not there. This minister came out of nowhere. He said, "Oh, I'll help you." I thought, "Oh you've got to be kidding." I said, "Really..." He said, "I want you to meet my wife," and I thought, "Oh no." I ran over to meet her and there's nothing worse than cold liver, but cold liver was what I got. She didn't even shake my hand. She was not sincere in that. Anyway, I went to a store and I took the two children once and you could just feel the hush because, "Here she comes with these two children." I was shopping and they were shopping. Well, the folks had all been out of town and I did a lot of the shopping because I could. This lady came around and Marty could not read so she said, "I don't know what to do, Mrs. Wilburn, I can't read (whines)." I said, "Peter, you take her and give her something to put in the basket." I said, "But now be careful and be quiet." So he went around to do that. This lady came around. She said, "My! You've got a lot of nerve. I've got two grandchildren just about like them and I never bring them to the grocery store." I felt, "My goodness," I said, "Why?" "Well," she said, "They would wreck it." I said, "Oh?" There would be times when the kids were always a problem to the people, but not a problem to me, because that was not the way they were any way. They would stand off as if to say, wait until she gets out of here, and, of course, they would wait for me to get out and then they could talk.

LW: So a lot of talking went on behind your back?

ALW: Yes. I went to the... talk about things you meet... I like music all kinds, and on Sunday afternoons they had a program, sometimes, an afternoon with the strings. I
had gone to the very first one and enjoyed it very much, and in leaving this lady said, "Oh, you’re here again! Do you come to this sort of thing because you think this is where you should be seen. Or do you really like it?" The lady right in front of her said, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, you were here the last time. Now which one did you like the best?" She just smothered her out, you know, I never needed to answer. Oh, there were plenty of those types of things.

LW: Little snubs. They dinged at you.

ALW: Yes. Little petty stuff. So we walked out together and just talked and went on. Then, another time, I had gone to the Post Office. I don’t remember who was running for President, he was from Detroit, and this man had these papers and he was standing outside and he says, "Oh, are you out today?" I thought, "I’m out most of every day." So he said, "I’ve got a paper here I want you to read. Can you read Dutch?" I said, "No I don’t." "Oh", he said, "I was going to let you read this." I said, "But I have some friends they’re keeping busy teaching me a lot of Dutch things." He looked at me kind of funny and he said, "Well, no, I don’t want to give it to you. But you people are talking about (whatever his name was in Detroit who ran for President that year) and I thought maybe you’d like to read what he’s saying about you because, you know, he’s going over to the Netherlands and he is really saying everything about you folks." I said, "Oh? Is that so?" He said, "Yes. I thought you’d want to read this because I don’t think you’d want to vote for him." I said, "Well, I really couldn’t worry about things that are going on in Detroit. Have you ever heard of the beam and the mote?" He said, "The what?" I said, "The beam
and the moat. Why would you give me something to read in the paper about the beam and the moat? You need to work on your own eyes. They talk about the beam and the mote." He said, "The what?" I said, "Well you don’t know about that? Where are you from?" "THIS IS MY TOWN! I WAS BORN HERE!" "But what is it they say? The beam and the mote? You should clean them both out, I guess, I don’t know. Do you know what the beam and the mote are? Well, I’ll take this with me." Do you know about the beam and the mote? (addressed to LW)

LW: Yes.

ALW: Good. Then you know about the beam and the mote. But I’m not supposed to know those things, you know. I went to a fabric shop down town. I was going to buy a piece of material and the lady kept saying, "Well what are you going to do with it? What do you want it for?" I said, "Well, I really wanted to make sort of a top for a dress that I’m making, a little two piece dress." She fiddled and she fuddled and she said, "Oh, well, I’d like to see that sometime." I said, "Oh well, when I get it finished." She said, "No, I tell you. You make your clothes. I want you to put them on and wear this and bring this down. I want to see it." I said, "Well, I’ll think about it," but I thanked her anyway and I went on about my business. I went to the store once and this man was coming out and he was very well attired in his tweeds, and he opened the door and he started out and he looked at me and saw me and he just was going to barge across in front of me so I thought, "Well, I’m just walking here anyway," so I just walked all in his path and his tweed shoes and everything and he said, "Oh, I’m so sorry, lady, excuse me." I said, "Oh, no harm
done, but that’s alright,” and I just kept right on walking. But all of those little petty
things you just... oh, I tell you, I had a neighbor, also, when I moved here, and she
had never... She said, "Well I heard you were coming and I didn’t know what to
do." I said, "Oh? What was the trouble?" "When you were going to live next door
to me." I said, "Well, what did you think?" She said, "Well, I’ve never been around
colored people." I hate that word, colored. Our father, even though he left us, he
said, "Don’t let them call you colored, because you’re not colored. You are one of
God’s creations, and you are created by God and for a purpose." But to some people
I don’t say anything because I thought oh, well, chalk it up to they don’t know. She
said, "Well, I tell you, I have never been around colored people, but I have heard
about them. I have read about them. I have seen them, but I have my own
thoughts." I said, "Oh? In other words to run or not to run? Okay. Then you are
going to wish you had. I mean it! You are going to wish you had. Because, there
will be no hard words, no fisticuffs, no talking, no this, no that, we’ll just go along.
Then you will wish, 'Oh why didn’t I run while I had the opportunity!'" But she was
kind of pitiful.

LW: Did she stay or did she move out?

ALW: No, she stayed. Well, it got so nice, that she was afraid she would miss something.

In fact, there were head residents and some business ladies, and there were about
twelve. When they would have something, we would all do things together. I really
began to enjoy it because we did different things. But one day something had
transpired on the campus, and there’s no doubt you do know the six children are not
dummies. You know that. They're very smart, very down to earth, and very flat
footed, they're well planted, and you just wouldn't want to believe it, because one of
the girls was going to take some course once and she said, "Oh mamma, I think I can
ace that. Don't even worry." Her mother said, "Now listen. If you are just taking
something to ace it, forget it! You are taking something to learn something, not to
ace it! If you're going to ace it just forget it until you're ready to really learn
something." She didn't say any more. Once one of the girls said something about,
"Well, they do so and so and so and so. They don't do so and so and so and so and so."
Dr. Vanderwerf said, "Okay, sweetie, go up and pack your clothes and you move in
with that family. Now you don't have to worry about us because we don't do that."
Father has spoken! Father has spoken (softly). That type of thing, you know. But
they are a very, very unusual different type of people.

LW: Tell me a little bit about your reception on the campus among the faculty, staff and
students, that sort of thing. Was it the same or was it different?

ALW: It was about the same. You would meet about the same type of thing. For instance,
they would ask questions. What do you do? I don't see you doing so and so. One
man asked me if I didn't wear a uniform. "Well", I said, "Do you think it makes any
difference in my work? What would it have to do with my work", I said. "Well, I
don't know but I've never seen you wear a uniform." I don't know who he was.
Then he said, "Well, I see you go along here about this time every evening." It was
a nine to five job, but I had times when I would work later. Bob De Young, you
know Bob De Young? Well he was a very, very nice... is he still on the staff?
LW: Yes, he's still here. About ready to retire, but he's still here.

ALW: He was really very, very... He was nice, I'll say, because he would say, well, if something had transpired and you hate talking about things, but I would act as the hostess or something, you know if she was busy or like she was out of town that particular day and she said, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn", she said, "This is going to fall in your hands." But she came back, and she had to leave and she said, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, would you please come and finish serving this cake? I went in to serve the cake, finish serving the cake, and it was quiet! That's what you get. There's not so much the vocal, the language or anything or anything is said, but you get that quiet...

LW: Conversation sort of stops?

ALW: Yes. I wonder what she's going to do? So I went on and served the cake and I want to talk about that because he said, "Mrs. Wilburn, you know something? I've heard a lot of things about you. But you know, you just do everything! You just do everything! I believe, when the Vanderwerfs asked you to come and work for them, they saw that and they knew what they were doing." I said, "Oh, I wouldn't know that, but I thank you" and left it alone, because these people were sitting around the table.

LW: Were the children quite sensitive to the difficulties you were encountering or did that pretty much go beyond them at that age?

ALW: Well, some of them were. They were kind of low key and quiet with it you know. They didn't, because... What was the movie? "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." I went to see that with the oldest girl, Gretchen, and some friends. She said, "Oh,
Mrs. Wilburn, you’ve got to see it." I said, "Oh, Gretchen, I’ll see..." "Oh, come on and go with us." So I did. But you know they would really not say too much about that because they always thought, "Well, we won’t tell Mrs. Wilburn that. Because we don’t want to hurt...." Some of the things... There was a young man came one day and he said, "I want to talk to you." He was dating one of the girls. I said, "Oh?" He said, "Yes, I’ve been wanting to talk to you." I said, "Come in and be my guest." He came in and talked to me. "Do these children mind you?" I thought, "Hmm, that’s old folks talking--mind you." I said, "Well, what do you mean?" "Well", he said, "Do they mind you? Do they..." I said, "Well we don’t use that in this house. Now I don’t know, but my roots are, even with mother and daddy, gone. Each child has a responsibility to the family structure and that works here whether they’re here." "Well", he said, "I just wondered." I said, "Now you know. Now, what do you do in your home?" He said, "Well..." Now I didn’t tell the Vanderwerfs all of those things. I never told them everything. I never told them a lot of things. Well, you know how it is. But I did ask her about that and those children. She said, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, they’re terrible. (laughs) They are just terrible." One day when she was having the Board...

LW: The Board of Trustees?

ALW: Yes. Because there are two boards, now. What is it? One is the Board of Regents.

LW: We have a Board of Trustees here and that is the governing body for the college.

ALW: Oh, who are the people who come from the churches and they have a...

LW: They’re all one board now.
ALW: Oh, they’re all one board. See there? I didn’t know... Well anyway they were having their... and she said, "Oh, it falls in your lap. I may be back and I may not. But then you’ll have to do this." The head residents... I don’t know if they do that now or not either... act as hostesses. Do they?

LW: I don’t think they do that anymore for the Board.

ALW: Okay, but then if something comes up and they’re having a gathering or something then the head residents will help you and assist you as the hostess. So I had found some artificial fruit and I scrubbed and cleaned and washed it and put it in a block to freeze it. I had about three because it was quite warm that day and I was telling the ladies because they came in and they were so busy. "Now what do we do? What do we do?" I was busy telling them, "Well, you do this thus and so," and one of them spoke up and I heard Mrs. Vanderwerf come in. She came in the front way and never said a thing and one of them said, "Oh Alta, you do so many things. Where in the world do you learn that?" She said, "Oh well. I know you’ve been around a lot of white people and I guess you learned how." Mrs. Vanderwerf hit that door and she said, "I’ll have you know Mrs. Wilburn has a Imher and she learned a lot of things and she has taught us." Oh, she just let it out! I guess... After all, they’ve got things too, you know. She just let it out. I never said another word, but I froze this artificial fruit, colored the cake of ice, and put it on... But you have to have some common sense. You have to have something to sell or you aren’t going to have a job, and that was one of the things, we always had a job as our mother always said, "Go beyond the line of duty in farming or whatever." When I first came, that’s
another thing, they were getting me set up in a place and I just came up with these terrible backaches and I thought, "Well, that’s not right." So I stripped the bed and looked and the mattress was no good there. So I said to Mrs. Vanderwerf, I said, "I want you to come and look at my mattress. I have better than this at home and I don’t like this at all," I said, but I’ve been coming up with this backache." So she said, "Oh, Mrs. Wilburn, my goodness. Get rid of that right away." So she said, "I’ll order one." It didn’t come and it didn’t come. I went home for Christmas and I came back and it still wasn’t here. So she said, "Did you ever get your mattress?" I said, "No", and I said, "It’s terrible." So I said, "Do you want to come over and see it?" She said, "No, I don’t want to see it. You say it’s bad and if you say it’s bad I believe you." So she ordered it. The people that had it then, I can’t even think of their names, but anyway, she called me and she said, "Oh, that slipped my mind." She said, "I’ll be right over and we’ll go right over and we’ll check it and see." So she said, "Oh my goodness. That’s terrible." She said, "I’ll call you and then you can come over and strip it and get it ready for the men when they come to take it." Her husband and son and son’s friend came when she called. I went over to strip my bed and get these things on it, and the maintenance men that carry out the junk, now I mean junk, said, "Hey, what do you want us to do with this mattress? Where do you want us to store this." He says, "Oh my goodness, that’s a disgrace. Take it to the junkyard." He said, "Why, I didn’t know we had anything on campus that looked like this." I said, "You did too. You knew you had it here. You put it here, didn’t you?" Of course, there he stood with his son and the friend. I said, "Didn’t you put
"it here?" I said, "If you didn’t put it here who did?" He never said a word. They went upstairs and took it out and left and never said a word. I thought, "Well, I knew that all along, you know."

LW: They put it there because they wanted you to be uncomfortable.

ALW: Well, they just thought, "Well, she’s not worth it." I told him that. I said, "You just thought I wasn’t worth it!" I said, "If that’s the reason just say so! Because it won’t hurt me." They never said a word. They just took it right out. I went down town one day and they had got a new station wagon and I was parallel parking, and this man came and it was kind of crowded and he was just going to drive in like this and I was taught to back in like that and so he kept inching up and inching up...

LW: This one spot.

ALW: One spot, this one spot. I thought well you know you’re wrong, so I just finally stopped and turned around with my hands up on the seat and looked at him. The car was loaded. I thought, "I’m not moving!" He looked and backed out and tore off! Never said a word. But those were the kind of little... those... oh so many of them. You know, you just learned to live with them.

LW: You had that here more than any other place that you lived?

ALW: I never had that any place!

LW: When you lived in Kansas that was a relatively rare thing?

ALW: Yeah. We have it. Don’t think we don’t. It’s there. Every place. In fact, I had asked for a chest of drawers and she says, "Well, there’s not a chest of drawers on the campus." I said, "Oh really?" I said, "Well then I will have to ask... I can’t
think of the man’s name now but anyway he was over something. I said, "I will talk to him. I bet I’ll get one." She said to me... well, that afternoon the phone rang and she said, "Oh, we found a chest of drawers for you so we’ll bring it right over."

There was not a mirror in the place, you know and I asked about a mirror. "Well, you don’t have any place to put a mirror." I said, "Why couldn’t you put a mirror behind this door here. That’s all I want." She said, "Oh, I thought you just wanted a little shelf mirror." I said, "No, I know how I look and I don’t need that. I just want a mirror so I can see the hem of my dress. The other day I went out and someone said, "Oh, your slip is showing." I said, "Oh thank you. That’s all I want." She says, "Oh well, you do sew, don’t you."

LW: So the racism was very obvious, very prominent but not overly blatant. It was just sort of these little incidents then.

ALW: "I’ll get her this time. I know this will throw her," you know. Of course, having been raised the way I was it takes a lot to throw us.

LW: Yes. You were the right person to deal with that I suppose. A sad commentary on the community at large. Tell me a little bit. You came here in ’62 and the Vanderwerfs left I think in 1970... ’71. Tell me about... we talked about your early years in coming and the encounters you had. Tell me a little about your last years here. I know that Dr. Vanderwerf had some difficulty those last few years.

ALW: Well, I know he did but then that part didn’t particularly touch me. Did you ever know Dr. Fried?

LW: I know him well.
ALW: You do? You know him well? How is he?

LW: He’s aging, but he’s doing pretty well. He still gets around.

ALW: Does he have a hearing aid? Someone said he had trouble with his hearing.

LW: He has a little bit of trouble with his hearing but he’s not deaf.

ALW: He’s not deaf? He was one, he said, "Oh, please don’t leave us, because, you made your niche." I said, "No, I don’t want a pat situation," you know, somebody said, well she’ll be here, we’ll pad the cells, and that will make her feel better and we’ll do this and we’ll do that and she’ll say. I thought, "No, I don’t want to stay." I had thought of going home then, but Dr. Vanderwerf said, "No, don’t go." But Dr. Fried had said to me, "Well, we hate to see you go." I don’t know who we are. "But," he said, "It hasn’t been pleasant, I know, for Cal, and they’re going to leave." I thought it was more pleasant... Well, I wouldn’t say that. It was just as unpleasant for him, because he’s Dutch, but she’s not Dutch.

LW: What kind of problems do you think he encountered, or did you hear that he encountered?

ALW: Well, I just don’t know. I know he had encountered problems, because he was in the hospital for a few days. Of course, I think he was responsible for integrating a lot of the college. Because, a lot of the black students had come. Well for a better word I’ll just say "Not worthy." I’m sure of that. You haven’t heard that. You don’t know that. You know that don’t you?

LW: I’ve heard those kinds of remarks.

ALW: Yes, they were not... This is true.
LW: Academically they weren't strong?

ALW: No! This is really true. It was too bad, and they wasn't strong and they didn't apply themselves. It just wasn't for them, a community like this.

LW: Because they encountered the same kinds of problems you did but were less equipped to deal with them.

ALW: Yes. Much less, because I'm grown. I went down town. I didn't bring my television, and I thought, well if I'm going to be here long I'll buy a little television. I went down town to shop around and went in one place and I looked at one. I thought, I think that's it, so I asked the man if he would deliver it. He said, "We don't deliver. You would have to take it with you." I said, "Oh, I didn't know that. Thank you," and I turned and walked out. He said, "Oh, just a minute. Wait a minute." I said, "Oh, no thank you. You answered my question," and I went on. I went across the street, I'm sure he watched me, and bought a television. I'm sure he knew I got one. Because he probably went over and said, "Did that colored woman come over here and buy a television." This man (yes, I paid for the television) and he said he would bring it out and I was home, I told him what time I would be home because I would come before their closing time, because we would have worked that sort of thing out. When I got in, there it sat at the top of the steps, and I thought, "Well, who in the world would do that?" So I went in and called him, and the man came and he said, "Oh, I think if you had asked Mr. Vanderwerf he would came over here and set this up for you." Oh, that just really chapped my hide, that really galled me. So I looked at him and I said, "Who usually brings your televisions in and sets
them up?" "Oh! We do that, we do that." I said, "Well then if you don’t want to set this one up, you take it and give me my money." "Oh, I wouldn’t think of that," but it implies a lot of things and I thought, "I just don’t like that," and I said, "Well, if you set them up will you please set it up? Just set it up!" Oh, he was very cordial and very friendly about it. But, I didn’t like that at all.

LW: All the implications?

ALW: Yes.

LW: When you left in ’71 were you ready to go?

ALW: Well, at that stage in my life, I had made up my mind in whatever state I am, to make myself satisfied. There is got to be a reason for it. Now I really did. Because we went to Fort Collins. There are black people in Fort Collins, a spoonful, handful, thumbful. They bought a house in the country club area, and that’s kind of out. This lady came to the door once. She says, "We’ve heard all about you." I thought, "I wonder what they heard?" She said, "But you’ve never been over to our country club." I don’t belong to any country club. Why would I go to a country club here in Holland? Why would I go to one in Lawrence? Kansas City? You know what I mean? Common sense, isn’t it? I kind of looked at her and I said, "Well I don’t have any business at the country club I don’t know what I would do over there. "Oh, I just thought you had never been." Well, she knew Mrs. Vanderwerf wasn’t home. So of course when she was gone she came to… I thought, "Oh, people! Don’t they ever grow?" No, it’s terrible.

LW: Did you get the same kind of attitudes when you went to Fort Collins that you had
here in Holland? Was it less so or more so?

ALW: Well, it was a little different there because we lived out and we didn’t completely unpack. As she said, it would be for a year. I had made up my mind that I would not go on with them. But, yes, there were certain little things and I thought, "Ah. Dear, dear, dear!" You go to Kansas City, you would get the same things. For instance, I wanted a folding cane. You know, the folding canes have not been so common. But in later years they’ve got some folding canes and I bought one and then the string broke, and I thought, "Well I better not go too far without it." So I called around and we have, of course, the inner city, and we have Overland Park and Leawood, the upbeat suburbs. So, I went out where this lady sold canes in her homes. She was out in the more of an aristocratic district and she says, "I’ll call my friend over in Leawood and see if he has any." She called him and he said, "Yes." I said, "Oh I appreciate that. Then I’ll go." But you see, I had done Kansas City, and the inner city is different. You don’t know anything about that, do you?

LW: I’m not from a large city myself.

ALW: You wouldn’t know. Now you’d have to go to Grand Rapids. I bet you would find plenty of things in Grand Rapids. There’s an inner city in Grand Rapids and the outer area. So I called him and he said, yes, he had a cane. So I said, "Well, I’ll be out to see about that." When I went he said, "Oh! You’re the lady that called." "Oh. But we deliver," this is on the phone, "Where do you live?" I said, "Well, I’m in the inner city. In fact, I’m in the ghetto." Uh oh! I said, "Thank you very much," but I thought, "Well, I’m going to go get the cane. I’ve go to look at him
face to face." So when I went out and got it, because I had just called and exhausted everything. So when I went out to get the cane I said, "Do you have a folding cane?" He said, "Oh! You’re the lady that called about the cane!" I said, "Yes. You’re the man that said, when I said I wanted the folding cane and I lived in the inner city, in fact I’m in the ghetto you said, ‘Uh oh!’" He said, "I guess I’ll have to give you a discount." You know, money does a lot of things, they think. You know: well, I’ll give her a discount and…

**LW:** Make it go away.

**ALW:** Yes, make it go away. I took the cane anyway and he gave me a five dollar discount, and it has bothered me ever since because I didn’t thank him. But I didn’t thank him for it. Because money, is terrible.

**LW:** Well, we’ve talked about a lot of things this morning.

**ALW:** Well, did we talk enough of the right things?

**LW:** Why, I think so. I was particularly interested in some of your experiences, as you describe them, some of the difficulties you encountered as a black person in Holland when there were very few black people in Holland. I think some of the difficulties you encountered are encountered still today with the Hispanic Mexican-American community. Maybe less so than they were thirty years ago.

**ALW:** Yes, because the Mexicans were more or less confined, I believe, in a little area.

**LW:** Now they make up almost 20% of the city’s population.

**ALW:** They have moved…

**LW:** They are more throughout the community and there’s a Hispanic member on the City
Council and there's still tensions, but I think much progress has been made from the
time you lived here in the 1960s.

ALW: You think there has.

LW: I think there has been significant progress, not to say that there are not still
difficulties.

ALW: Well, don’t you think we’ll always have difficulties?

LW: I think whenever people have reason to identify differences, whatever they may be,religious, ethnic, racial, people will tend to focus on the differences. At least some
people will focus on the differences.

ALW: Yes. This is very true. I have found it very interesting, you know. But people can be... They got a car, too, a new car, and a lady said, "Oh, do you think you would be driving that car?" I just looked at her. I never answered her, because I thought,"Oh Alta, you don’t want to get down on that level, too." I got used to an awful lot. That’s another thing, I went to church, and the man said, "You told me you were Baptist." Because I went to another church, it was Christian Reformed, not too far over. He said, "Why did you come to our church?" I said, "Oh, I didn’t know you had a church, too!" Because nearly every other man at that time had attended the seminary. They were not ministers but you know they... And he said, "But you told me you were a Baptist." I said, "Well I am a Baptist." He said, "Well why did you come?" I said, "I was only looking for God. You mean to tell me He doesn’t go to your church, too?" YES! YES! HE’S FREE TO ALL! He was walking down the street but he was waiting for me. You know, that’s another thing. Everybody in the
town knew where I lived. They probably knew my name, but everybody knew my... If anyone came to town, and very few people did, but I would have a friend or so coming through from Grand Rapids, Chicago, something like that, and they would want to know... "Oh, I can take you right to her house." I was going to work that morning and everybody knew where I worked. Well, he was waiting for me because he was the head gardener on the campus at the time. ...just shouting down the street. I thought, "Yesterday was Sunday. He didn't shout in church." That sort of thing. They used to have a fruit stand and I went to do the big shopping that day. It was a busy life. Living a busy life helped, and you did a lot of things, and I met a lot of people. This one lady said to me, "I remember the Sunday you walked into Hope Church." She said, "I could have never have done that." I said, "But why?" She said, "If the shoe had been on the other foot, I couldn't have done it." I said, "But with all of your education, and you're so intelligent and worldly-wide traveled and read and all that, I don't have that. But I feel that I can do most anything and why shouldn't I go and try and do my best? If I stumble and fall, I'm sorry, but if you teach me your way I'll get up and try again." "Oh! I never could have done that sort of thing." They were well known in this community, and I think, very good to Hope College. But they're dead. Oh no. I don't recall that little petty...

LW: Tell me a little bit after you left Holland just so we can wind up the interview here. You went to Fort Collins and spent a year there with the Vanderwerfs and then you moved back to Kansas?

ALW: No, Kansas City, Missouri. I didn't go to Kansas because my sister begged me, she
said, "Oh please come," she said, "We haven't been together in thirty years. We haven't gone to the same things and done some of the same things. Please, please come and try it. I think you can make it in Kansas City if you can find a job." This is interesting, too, because I did. I had fun. I never had to look for a job because we got jobs by word of mouth. With no skills to offer, you take anything. I thought, "Oh, what am I going to do?" But I had fun looking for a job. I went downtown to a fabric shop to one of the bigger stores and I took a couple of tests. I passed them, but it's too many people and too big and I didn't want that. So then I took a test... Well, I went to see about this lady in a little fabric shop which I liked and I did sew. I liked that and I enjoyed it. But then she was telling me all of the benefits and so forth and so on and what I could and couldn't do and I couldn't sew for other people and I thought, "Well, I don't believe I want this job, but I don't feel those pennies in the bottom of the purse and I've got to get to work now before the last one goes." So I took the job. I told her, yes, I would take it, and we worked on the price and everything and she said, "I won't be here the next day. Don't come tomorrow, come the next day, and come earlier so I can show you some things around and get you started." I went real early, real early and told her, "I wasn't going to take the job." (End of tape and interview).