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Bonge, Richard Oral History Interview: History of Law Enforcement in Holland

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ABSTRACT: (Topics Appear in similar order of Transcript)
Jack Van Hoff, Bonge's Personal History, Military Experience, How he became a police officer, officer responsibilities, Station Location, Crime, Van Hoff, Friendships of officers, canine unit, Story of Church robberies, GED, Community, Parking ticket dilemma, Effect on Family, Traffic, Teamwork in Department, Rewards of an officer, Ruth and children, Robbery of 1932, Driver's License Instruction.
[Started by looking at photographs]

RB I told you on the phone I think, he was, he joined the department when I think the date was early in the 1900s and he (Jake Van Hoff) was the chief, he was the one who hired me and I went to his funeral later, but I couldn’t imagine that newspaper article, it seems to me to be 1927 that he started.

MN Did you know Chief Van Hoff well?

RB Yes.

MN What was he like as a person?

RB I thought he was honest, he was a Christian, and a good officer.

MN In what ways was he a good officer?

RB He tried to do what he should do. The policeman’s job is to uphold the law; to be an example, both in his conduct and in his own life and I think he tried.

MN One thing I have been curious about is what happened around the time of Jack Van Hoff being hired as Chief, what happened with Ira Antles being removed from his position. But I know that he was the chief here for a while. Previous to that he was a conservation officer. I really didn’t know him, I heard my cousin talk about him. My cousin’s five or six years older than I am. He knew him quite well because I believed he lived near him. My cousin had a jewelry store, maybe he knew him personally, I don’t know.

MN So you are a native from Holland?
RB Yes. Well, we lived, I was born in 1917, and in 1926, my parents moved to a farm southwest of here in the Graafscaap area. And I lived there on the farm with my parents until I went in service in '42. But when I went to high school or was of high school age, I went to Holland Christian for a year and a half. I kept getting lung troubles and the doctor said, “he’s got to quit school.” Well, that was right up my alley. Later on I regretted having missed graduating, but I got through it. And in '42 I went in service.

MN You were a military police officer?

RB I was drafted, first I was put in the airforce. And then I was assigned to an airplane mechanics school, and I graduated from that, and then I was sent to a propeller specialists school, and I graduated from that, then I was sent to Dallas Texas, was assigned to the 62nd Ferry Squadron and put on detached service to the guard squadron. And after a week there, I thought this is not the MPs and I had asked for the MPs all along. Nope, he said, it is too late, you are on a shipping list. And two weeks after I got in, Fort Worth Texas where I was assigned to the Ferry Squadron, but on detached service to the Guard Squadron, two weeks later I got on a train with quite a few hundred others and there were, after three or four day train trip across the country, we ended up one night in Florida and the next morning they told us you have all been transferred to the corps of military police, and we are forming a battalion here, five companies, I was assigned to 1205. It was 1205, 6, 7, 8, and after a month there we were supposed to get furloughs, part of us and that same night I was told “you’re transferred.” Oh how come, my company is going to get furloughs. “Well their shipping out and they are one man
short, and they want you." So I was transferred to 1208. The next day I was shipped out with them to Jackson Barracks, New Orleans and a week later we got on the boat in New Orleans. A 21 days later we were in Port of Spain, Trinidad. We stayed there for a month just training at Fort Reed, which was on the island of Trinidad. Then we got on another boat and fourteen days later we got off in Natal, Brazil. That was where the largest airbase in the world was located. And I was there for 25 months straight. The main landing field for everything that went by air to Europe, to India, to Africa, to China came through South America, through Natal. From Natal, going east it was seven or eight hundred miles to Asention Island. At Asention Island they could refuel and they could go another seven or eight hundred miles and be in Decar, North Africa. And then they would go to India and then over the hump, the Himalayan hump into China. So it was a big airbase and busy.

MN After the service, where did you go? Or when did you finish the service?

RB In November of '45. Then I got discharged.

MN And did you come back to Holland?

RB Yes, well, my wife and I got married on the 10th of October. We had known each other before our wedding service and we became engaged in '42 when I was at Lincoln, Nebraska. And in November, no, September of '45, the 18th I think I got my orders in Brazil, but it took about five days to get here. And she had the wedding day set for October 10, and we got married then, and I had 45 days temporary duty, that meant I didn’t have to make any formations, I was at home, and during that time we got married and had a short honeymoon trip, and we
stayed in a cottage north of Holland a ways and took a few side trips. During the war, the first B29s that were used, all came through South America. One night we had a plane crash, I was commander of the guard. It took us maybe three hours before we could get to the scene. It was out in the jungle. We could not find a road to it. We did not have radios then and it took a long time to get there. When we did get there, there was one crewmember alive. I think there were nine dead. The plane was scattered all over the hillside. And I wrote my wife the next day that something had happened and I didn’t get to write her. About three weeks or a month later I got a letter from her and said you wrote a while ago that something had happened and you could not write, could that have been a plane crash. What happened with her in the meantime, she worked for a railroad company in Chicago, and a friend of hers that lived in southern Illinois went home for a weekend and she came back with the news that her mother’s friend got a telegram for the war department, “your son was killed somewhere in South America” and my wife started thinking, that was around the same time, and she wrote and said “could there have been a man by the name of Einselman that was killed and I looked up the records and there was. And then of course when the mother got that news I was at the crash, I worked the funeral, was in the honor guard, and I knew where he was buried, would I write her and tell her what I could, maybe take a picture, then if I came home, could I come and see her? We did all that, on our honeymoon. We went down there, we told her when we were coming, and she wanted to pay for the trip and we would not take it, but she had all her friends in, they had to hear what I could tell. When we went home, she
stood by the door and she said “You won’t let me pay for your gas, but you can’t stop me from giving your wife a wedding present” and she gave her a five-dollar bill. She was very thankful and I was thankful that I was able to do that little bit for her. Then I worked for, my brother gave me a job in his auto repair shop in Zeeland, I worked for him for about three years, and then in the early ’50s I got on the police department finally.

MN How did that come about, how did you come to be a police officer?

RB Well I wanted to be, but this guy, Van Hoff, he insisted that I had to have a high school diploma, well I did not have that. At that time, the police department was definitely under the Police and Fire Commission, and I talked to the Police and Fire Commissioners individually, and all agreed that my military experience, in general, acquired knowledge over the years, was just as good as a high school diploma, so with there blessing he had no where to go. So then he put me on as a utility man at first, a maintenance man. And this guy was manager at the time, a number of years later, one winter day, I was plowing the parking lot by the city hall, nobody else would do it, the street department said they were too busy. Cars had no place to park, so the chief asked if I would hook up a plow on the tractor that I use still, and plow parking lots. They paid me on my police time, and I got paid for the use of the tractor, and I enjoyed it so, and then I was stopped, it was this guy, the manager. “Hey Bange, would you rather be a policeman than doing this?” I said yes. He said, “do you think this job ought to be in the police department?” I said no, I think it is part of the street department, I said I am going to see if I am going to get it in there. So he pushed some buttons, and the job
ended up with the street department. Prior to that I had to paint all the streets with the traffic markings, parking stalls, mark those out, repair the parking meters that were knocked down by cars. Put up stop signs, all that stuff was my job, but then I went into the uniform division as such.

MN What was Holland like when you were an officer?

RB It was smaller, it grew quite a bit right after I got on the department, this was really the whole police department.

MN When you became an officer, what kinds of duties did you have, what were your responsibilities as an officer?

RB It depends on what, they had a downtown patrolman who would walk Eighth Street on foot and after the stores closed you had to try the doors, if you found one open, you’d go in, check and see if everything was alright, and call headquarters and tell them what happened, that you were in there and nothing was wrong, they would send somebody down to lock it up. And if you saw anything wrong in enforcing laws, you were supposed to take care of that also. You did that usually from four to midnight. First you had to mark cars, check the parking meters for violators, put a stripe on the wheel if it was a limited time zone, put a chalk mark on the tire, and if it was still there the next time you came around you could write a ticket for over time parking. Things like that and then after hours if there were liquor establishments on your route, you were supposed to check those every night, see that there were no minors in there, no drunks. A drunk is anybody under the influence of intoxicating liquor. It was in many ways a whole lot different from what it is now. I don’t know that they have any foot patrol
anymore, maybe they have, but you rarely see anyone. We also had an alley patrolman. He'd work from seven to three at night, from seven PM till three in the morning, and check the back doors. He was in civilian clothes. We didn't carry radios because we didn't have any. The radios that they had were in the police cars, but they were too cumbersome to carry. Walkie-talkies came out quite a bit later, so if anything happened, you would have to get to a telephone somewhere and call in. And there were call boxes stationed, well, there was one at 8th and Central, they were in several different places, were you had to put a key in and pick up the receiver, and the guy at the headquarters picked up his receiver, about the extent of the conversation was your number or your name and where you were and hang it up again, and they would make a ticker tape of where you would punch the box. They really didn't use the boxes anymore when I started walking the alley beat. But they had lights, one at Lincoln and 8th, one at River and 8th, one at 14th and River I believe, one at 19th and river, and if you were in a car or walking you were supposed to watch those lights, if they were flashing, call in by telephone. They could tell you what was wrong and where to go.

MN That's quite different. Did that ever cause problems, make it difficult to be on time to a particular call?

RB Yes, I suppose it could, but I don't know of anything bad that happened during their time.

MN Where was the station located when you were an officer?

RB Do you know where River and 8th is? The Tower Clock?

MN Yes.
RB Going down 8th street to the west, there was an alley right behind the tower clock building. That was an old bank building there with a narrow alley there that ran across to seventh street, but there was a jog in it. It went past the back end of the bank and it came out on seventh street farther up the hill. And the next the alley down the hill on eight street was a wooden building with the name of VanLandegen. And then there was a modern building and there was an old wooden building first and that was a tractor sales place and then the driveway and then later the tractor sales place was demolished which was a wooden building and the VanLandegen building stayed for years, but where the tractor building had been, a John Deere dealer. They fixed my tractor there you know. When that building was demolished, Standard Grocery, a wholesale grocer put up a building there of masonry, and next to them was a driveway, and the police department was right next to that, and the old police station was right next to the police department, they had a common wall. The police department was quite a long building, the front entrance was on 8th street, and the back was half way to 7th street, [draws invisible map on table] the front part was the chief's officer on the east half of the building and then they had the public come in here, that was the desk and then right back of the desk was a counter, because they issued operator's licenses here and things like that, people could pay parking tickets there. Going north, there was a cellblock with three cells. Then around, you had to go outside of the building, and then to the back end of the building there was another cell block, but that had two, well they were metal cages with bars, but they were actually not part of the building itself. The prisoners if there were any in there,
they were locked in the cages and then the door to the cages was a separate door that could be locked for the outside. So that strangers could not just walk in and get at the prisoners who were in there. It was always call the Hobo cell. There were hobos around town then. A hobo, what’s a hobo? That’s a person without obvious means of support. And there were quite a few around some of the time. One man who lived in there for a couple of weeks, I never new his name, he was a black man, a very good man. He got himself a job and he came and talked to me. He said, “Could I live in that place for a little while, I got a family and...” And they were up in Baldwin. And he says he got a job here. If he could live in there he’d keep it clean. And he certainly did. I think he lived there a couple of weeks and you would never know that place, and it was clean as a whistle and when he came out in the morning, he looked like a gentleman. He worked for Padnos and he worked for DeNooyer Chevrolet first. It wasn’t DeNooyer then, it was Decker Chevrolet, he got a job there and when he earned enough money he moved his family. But he worked for Padnos for years. Was always friendly, he remembered me for many years and I remembered him. But I never knew his name. But those were things that could go on then; you didn’t have to go through channels.

MN What were typical crime committed back then, what were typical offences? You spoke of Drunkenness...

RB Well, I don’t know that there were so many crimes really. They had for a long time two officers on here; Lt. Bear and Srg. Woldring, Srg DeKraker, Neal Tors, Dennis Ende, those two were detectives part time, they would spent a week or two
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weeks working what we called the meter beat, downtown beat, daytime. Then they would work a week or two as a detective. If anything happened, any break-in or something, then sometimes they would work on it together, and sometimes not. [End Side A] Crimes even today in Holland, I don't think judging by what you read in the Sentinel, are not half bad. We were told in school in East Lansing more than once, that the traffic officers, as a rule they have hard sledding in a police department. The detectives and the crime unit, they get the glory and frequently the preferential treatment too. But they said, "how many people are murdered in your town, in a year, and how many people are killed in traffic accidents. If you ever look at the statistics, it is far in excess on the traffic side and yet traffic law enforcement is frequently neglected I think, I still think so.

MN     Do you think it was back then?

RB     I think... one thing was pointed out last night when we left the hospital, my son was driving, and as we came out, are you aquatinted with the hospital when you leave the emergency room?

MN     Yes.

RB     That is where he drove up to pick us up and then he can out on 24th street. We could see that there was a car coming, towards us from the east. He was on this side of the road and my son knew we had to wait for him and he was waiting, when it went past, we had seen it coming, he was on the south side of 24th street going west, when he got close we saw that it was a Holland Police vehicle. With no turn signals on and he turned into the next driveway. My son says, "you see dad what he did? That is why I don't obey traffic laws anymore." There was an
uniformed policeman in a police vehicle plainly marked no light on. He had his headlights on, but he had no red lights on, he was not on an emergency call, he was driving on the wrong side of the street for quite a ways, and then he made a left turn into the hospital, no signal on, for a turn. That is what gets my son’s goat. I think that’s what makes a lot of people think. They should be setting an example.

MN Was there anything that, you were an officer under Chief Van Hoff?
RB Yes.

MN Was there anything, any sayings or any kind of message that he always like to say repeatedly?
RB That he would say repeatedly you mean? Yes. He would say, we would have meetings frequently, every two weeks or a month when the whole department was supposed to. And he always emphasized that the patrolmen had to be on the streets during peak traffic hours, morning, noon, afternoon, and evening and a lot of times an officer, by their reports, you could tell they hadn’t written a single traffic violation, but they were supposedly riding for an eight hour shift. Many times he would say if I walk home at noon or I go for a ride in one of the cars, I can see three or four violations, you can work eight hours and not issue a single ticket? What are you doing? That was often mentioned.

MN How many officers were there on staff when you were there?
RB How many? I think at the most there were 21 when I was on. [Shows picture] Here there is only ten. One at least, this could be at the time, no date here. There
is an officer missing here. I can only be sure of about 8. I think one of these is from Zeeland. I would say under twenty definitely.

MN How old were most of the officers?

RB I would say 50 years or younger. Len Steketee was older. He stayed on until I think he was 72.

MN Now did you guys get know each other well?

RB Yes.

MN A lot of friendships made?

RB Yes. [Shows picture] This one here, well, I won’t even point him out. He was on the alley beat, and I was working the desk, and at night, you had to check the back doors of buildings. I might have been a corporal at the time that his happened. He was on the alley beat and he spent quite a long time in the station. I said, “Aren’t you supposed to be trying doors.” He said, “I have tried enough tonight, I am done.” I didn’t push it. I was just getting in for the other guy and I was the young one. The next morning we got a call from, I don’t know whether I got it, I think I did. I had to work until eight o’clock in the morning and before eight o’clock the phone rang. A man at the co-op, said “you better get a man down here, somebody tried to break into our safe.” And that was one of the doors that guy should have been trying. The next night I saw him and said “you see what happened in the paper, and do you know where you were a long time.” He says, “Yeah I know its been bothering me, that’s been bothering me.” I said, “well it is on your conscience now. I said that doesn’t mean that if you had been out there walking you’d have caught anybody, but that doesn’t mean either that you
wouldn't have. And if you had been out there walking your conscience would have been clear.” Like I said, when I was appointed a corporeal, but I served for about two years as a corporal, and I worked the desk a lot of times. But I, when they had staff meetings, that would be the chief, the sergeants, and the two detectives, I said am I supposed, “oh no, you are not part of the staff, you are just a corporal. But they did have a canine unit. They bought two police dogs; I don’t know how many thousands of dollars it cost to get them. They were specially trained, and they had gloves that were much bigger than a boxer’s glove and a big long cuff that would come almost up to their shoulders. One of the officers, when he was not wearing the cuff and the dog grabbed the officer just after walking down this driveway and the dog grabbed him on the arm for no good reason at all. That guy later became sheriff, the one who was bitten, of Allegan county. I don’t know if he is living anymore. Those are some of the things that went on.

Another thing that went on, a man was brought in to Dykstra’s funeral home, a corpse and they called us, and the chief sent another officer and said I should go along and help. The man had a big hole in his chest. Well it turns out, he was a bachelor, who lived with his brother, they were both in their eighties. And they were just inside city limits. And Dykstra’s picked the man up, he was lying on a couch in the house, but when they found the hole they called the police. So we went out, the brother told us, that the corpse was lying out in the backyard and there was a shotgun by him and a stick. He had seen the brother lying there, dead, so he picked him up by the shoulders, dragged him into the house, put him on the couch, and I don’t know who he called, he got a message anyway for somebody
to call Dykstra's. And they brought him in. His brother was just dead. We found the place where the gun was propped on the ground. There was enough snow to find little bit of tracks here and there. You can see where the butt of the gun was in the hard ground. The stick lying nearby, the stick was long enough for a person bending over the gun barrel, over the muzzle, could reach the trigger and push the trigger. So there were no charges filed at all. To this day I don't believe the old man knew, he knew yes that he killed himself, but that was a shame that his brother would kill himself. Nobody else has to know that, but the undertaker knew. Somebody had to look into that. So we talked it all over with the prosecutor and he said the man, the survivor, the brother, was not too sharp anymore, he lost most of his mental faculties, but he would tell you the truth when you asked him. "Yeah, he was found there." And they had, one morning I was supposed to work 8 to 4 on the desk and the man I was supposed to relieve, well he had done that job for years, he was a captain. He was the night captain. The chief would work 8-4 and the captain would work 12-8 as a rule, and from 4-midnight, we had nothing but the sergeants. Well, I came to work a little bit early that morning and then there was talk right away, we had a church broken into. And when they and there were some guys who had been walking around town quite a bit, and they got a cab, the got a cab driver, and there was only one cab driver who worked at night. There was nobody who worked in the cab office, because he did both. He would sit in the office until he got a call. And these guys had turned out they had probably gotten into a cab. More stories had started to come; one of the policemen had been following a Cadillac, all around town. He
would see them in different places, but when he would try to follow the guy, he would lose him, then he would turn up somewhere else, but just a glimpse. And finally it was his time to go home so nothing happened, but it all unfolded later. They thought these guys were involved in some burglaries or attempted burglaries. They had wet feet, they knew that, they wanted to get a train first, no trains leaving Holland. Then they wanted the cab driver to take them to Chicago, he couldn’t do that. Well, could he take him to Kalamazoo? Yeah, he could do that. Somebody knew that. So they had been trying to call the cab, they wouldn’t answer the radio; they had a radio in the cab. I asked the captain, did you call a blockade? No, can’t ask for a blockade, because you haven’t got the license number of the cab. Well heck you don’t need the license number, it had the name Holland Cab Company on the doors, so I called Paw Paw, there was the district headquarters of the State Police and asked them to put out a blockade out. "Well we can’t put a blockade out, but we will put an area broadcast out, and it was not twenty minutes later, we got a call from Ocsego. The policeman on duty had stopped in to pick up his chief; he heard the area broadcast go out on the state police radio, "Holland Cab was wanted for questioning, possibly two burglary suspects in the cab." As they were backing out of the driveway with the chief in it, "hey there goes that Holland Cab, we just had an area broadcast." They were stopped the two men, they brought him to Allegan, we had sent officers in the meantime to Allegan. And one of them called up, and he says “their feet are as wet as can be, the pants are wet up to their knees, they had been walking around in the snow a long time” and then by that time there were more calls that came in,
The one farthest out was the Graafscap Christian Reformed Church. They had their safe cracked, and a lot of different churches were hit. These guys, their shoes were soaking wet, “did you search them?” “Yeah, everything but their shoes. They won’t take their shoes off. What do they look like? I said, “make them take their shoes off.” Inside of the one was a big roll of currency. Paper Money. And they were tried later and convicted, some of them had done time before. I left the police department after that. I don’t think I had to go to trial for that at all, but after they had been in Jackson for I don’t know how long anymore, then they filed a suit that they had been illegally searched. Then I got subpoenaed. I was working at GE at the time. The trial was held in Grand Haven Circuit Court and they claimed they argued, their lawyer, I had no right to order that search. So they had me on the stand and I told them what I knew and the judge ruled no cause for action that I was fully justified. They went back to prison. Oh by the way, I learned that there was sometimes they used that the fact of sometimes not having a high school diploma to get rid of a guy. Then I learned from the newspapers that there was such a thing as a GED certificate, and all you had to do was take a test and all you had to do was take the test and if you could pass the test you got a certificate. So I found out the only place around here where they would give they would give those tests was East Grand Rapids. I went down there on my own time if I could take the test, “oh sure.” When do you give it? Certain days, I found out when, I came there on that day and I took the test and that same afternoon, the old lady who was the monitor, do they call them?
She went over the papers and "You have got on here that you went 9 and a half years? You never finished the tenth grade?"

"No."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Holland Christian."

"I can't believe these scores," she said.

"Are they still bad?"

"They are so high!"

I don't remember what the scores were but they were way above what was necessary to pass. So I got my certificate. Then I felt better. That was long before they started giving special courses and special ed for people who wanted to take a GED exam so they could pass the test. Then they defeated the whole purpose of the test. That is like giving the questions to the class that is going to take them tomorrow.

MN You were talking about the canine unit before. How many dogs did you have?

RB Hopkins had one dog, and Rosanka had the other.

MN It didn't last very long.

RB I don't think it lasted six months really. I don't recall.

MN Do you know why?

RB I would guess just plain disinterest.

MN What kinds of offenses were there other than traffic crimes or traffic violations and parking violations? What other kinds of violations were there, that were common when you were an officer?
RB  Assault and battery sometimes. Family fights which might result in an assault and
battery charge depending on how serious the fight got. Then there were I recall
several reports of supposedly going to have a gang fight in Kollen Park, but
nothing ever came of it. There never was one that I knew of.

MN  Was there a lot of interaction between the community and the police officers
when you were on the force when you were working?

RB  No, I mean you didn’t get invited as a policeman to anything.

MN  Did you get to know a lot of the people?

RB  Oh, yes. A lot of folks still know me by sight. Many years later, I was trying out
a car from an auto sales lot, and I came to his house later to return the keys, and
his wife came to the door, she took one look at me and she oh, just a minute, I’ll
get Levern, she turned around, called her husband, I didn’t know it was his wife.
I found out later, quite a while later, I thought that was a strange way, she thought
I was there because the kids were in trouble. [Laughter] She knew I had been a
policeman. I didn’t know their kids even, and I didn’t know his wife, but she
knew me, and that was years after I left the department. He knew why. If I go
out today its Bange what did I do now? Nothing. Part of it, in between time, if
there was in between time we are going to work on a box that is this long and not
that wide full of parking ticket stubs. People would hand, pay their parking
tickets. Sometimes people would have 10, 15, 20 of them. Meter violations.

[End of Tape I] One time I was working the downtown beat and one of my calls,
because we had to report in every hour supposedly or as near to it as we could,
both for our protection and for the officer if they had to give you a message, if
you did not hear from the man in an hour and a half two hours, you were supposed to send somebody out and look for him. Because he could have been waylaid. Knocked out. And I was told that a certain merchant wanted to see me. What about? “I don’t know, he said just to send Bonge up here.” I went there, he was alone in an upstairs office and he just talked for a while and then, he opened his desk drawer and he came out with a pack of parking meter tickets. “Hey, will you take care of these for me?” [Pause] I didn’t know what I was hearing really. I didn’t say anything. [Pause] He went to the same church I did. I had known him for years. I picked them up and put them in my overcoat pocket. [Pause] And I thought and thought. I stuck fifty cents into each one and stuck them in the fine box, and I lost all respect for the guy. [Pause] There was another case where an accident had happened at 17th and Lincoln, no not Lincoln, 17th and Columbia. A car had run down a guardrail, it was a small guardrail protecting the property, and it was all over the sidewalk, and broke that down and he’d like to know. I found some wreckage at the scene, just enough to spell out part of the word Belvidere. And Plymouth had made a Belvidere car. Boy, I went around to old bump shops I could think of. And I found one that had the Plymouth in there, and part of the word Belvidere was on the car yet, and the part I had fit perfectly. That guy wet to my church too. And I went and talk to him. He insisted up and down that it was not his car, he had not been there, he had not had an accident. I knew it was him, but a day or two later, a phone call came to the house, somebody wanted to talk to me, they called again, he isn’t home, my wife says “can I give him a message?” Well, he wanted to talk to me, and then he gave his name and
the guy I had talked to. He said, “I have to talk to you. I have to talk to you personally, could you come?” Yes. So I went there, he says “I couldn’t sleep the other night and my wife noticed there was something bothering me, and she said, ‘what’s the matter?’ ‘Oh, never mind, go to sleep.’ Three days I was still doing the same thing and she says, ‘what’s the matter?’ And he says, I told officer Bonge a lie. ‘Well,’ she says, ‘you have to go and talk to him then.’” And that is when he called up and told me, he says, “I lied to you. It was me, I am guilty, and God put it on my conscience.” I told him, well, I am glad you came to this and glad you confessed it to God, I said I am going to have to give you ticket. “Yeah I understand that.” So I am gave him a ticket and he paid his fine. But I think he was more honorable than the other one.

MN Did your position as a police officer ever effect your family? Was it ever a difficult job to have with the family?

RB My wife cried one night when I had to go out. She was scared. Before we were married she worked for a Chicago Police captain as a housekeeper. This captain’s wife was an invalid and they always had help in the house. They had a cook and a laundress I guess. But my wife, she was young when she started there, but she had a good job there and she knew a little bit about police work and I met here while she was working there, in fact, he once told her (she had told him some things about me) he says to her, you are going to marry that guy someday, well she did. But anyway, there was an ex, a convict who had gotten out of Jackson I believe and had friends up in the Gibson area, do you know where Gibson is?

MN No.
RB Never heard of it. It’s a village southwest of Holland. Out towards Laketown Park, you might of heard of that.

MN Yeah.

RB Well, he had acquaintances there. And they thought he might go there, so a bunch of us were to go out, and I was, that was when I was a Corporal, because I had to go out about 8 o’clock at night I guess. I was supposed to get down at 8 o’clock. Sergeant says don’t go home yet Bonge, I’ve got something for you. I think those guys might be or go there. The detectives were going to go to the house, which these guys on this picture, Ende and Tors, they were going to go to the house, but they wanted backup, so I think three of us, two besides me, and then the two detectives, they were going up to the house to talk. That’s the time she was, I remember she was ironing when I can in to tell her I was not coming home yet for a while. And what basically was involved. She was worried. And nothing turned up, they were caught somewhere else, they were never here. Although, Sunday noon, I was working and a car came off River onto Michigan and he was going really fast, I started chasing him, went through the village of Graafscap, and then turned back towards Holland on the Graafscap road, running stop signs every now and then, going as fast as he could go nearly, 75, 80 miles an hour. Then on 32nd street west, to the Castle Park road, there he turned left and got along side and tried to stop him and he swung the car right into mine. That was in Allegan County and nope, we was not going to get out of the car. And we had a couple of, a good reckless driving charge on him, Allegan County sent a deputy out, he charged him with the same, and later he moved out of town, and he was
put in prison in California, I believe, I don’t know if it was for murder, but he was convicted for making another man dance on someone else’s grave at gunpoint. That was the guy I had arrested there and followed all around.

MN What were the concerns of the Holland Police Department when you were there, in the community?

RB Mainly, I think, traffic. Because traffic was, like now, it takes you a while to get through Holland when it is busy. They started putting more through streets in while I was there. Pine avenue was made a through street. In fact I put up most of the stop signs along there. And central avenue was made through for quite a ways, but it was not really a coordinated plan, it was just, if the shoe squeaks, give it a little grease, or expand the shoe a little. Don’t buy a bigger pair of shoes. This manager that’s on the one picture, Herb Holt, he was one for narrow streets, “that’ll discourage speeding.”

MN Do you think it did?

RB He thought that.

MN Did it work?

RB I don’t know, it made it a lot more dangerous to speed.

MN What were the challenges of being a police officer during that time?

RB I don’t know that I had any particular challenges. I wrote a lot of tickets for parking on the wrong side of the street and a lot of people can’t see what’s wrong with parking if you are, if there is the street and you are going that way, what is wrong with driving over to this side of the road to the left side, jump out and go to the guy who lives there. “What harm does my car do here?” I’d say how did you
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get here? “Well I drove down here?” Did you ever hear of a head on collision? “Yeah.” How do they happen? [Laughter] Somebody is driving on the wrong side of the street. A lot of the other officers didn’t share my view, so I was not exactly the most popular guy in a lot of cases. But I would give them a ticket for it. Now a days, parking on the wrong side of the street is no uncommon occurrence. It happens all the time. Even the police cars do it.

MN Was there a lot of teamwork; did you work together with a lot of officers?

RB Yes. This one, when he was, he was always noted for being ornery, but I never found him so. He would ask me questions, yes, he was the lieutenant, he should know, but I didn’t say ‘well you ought to know that.’ No, I took him as a friend. This one [points to picture], is a very good guy. Good commonsense. One day he knew that the chief was trying to, riding me for no good reason. But Bonge was the maintenance man. Bonge has got to get the barricades out. And they had a little talking session in the back. And somebody said, well what can we do? Lets give Bonge a going over or something like that. But he stuck up for me. He said Bonge is doing an awful lot of work now a days and nobody gives him credit for it. Yeah the chief says ‘Bonge is a pretty busy man.’ But DeKraker, he once asked me, “Didn’t you have machine shop in high school?” I said “No I never went that far, but they didn’t have machine shop.” “They didn’t have machine shop in Christian High?” Not when I went. And then not long afterward there was an abandoned car and a toolbox in there and it has a micrometer in it. Well the department was getting into reloading their own ammunition for target practice. But when cartridges are fired a number of times, the brass tends to
stretch, and it has to be trimmed down or else it won’t go in the cylinder. So a micrometer is a handy tool to have. But they were sitting there, “Hey Bonge, how do you read a mic?” I said, “Well you had machine shop.” “Yeah, well I never learned to read a mic.” What kind of machinist can use a mic? Would you hire a carpenter who can’t read a rule? But those were the things that could keep you from being a policeman, if you didn’t have a high school diploma. And one of them became a captain later. He is retired now. His theme paper for the 12th grade in Holland High was written by a girl who worked as a clerk in Mille’s Ice Cream on College avenue, there is a little restaurant right next to the alley. She was finishing this at Mille’s Ice Cream when she used to be there years ago, her name was Nash. She told us. She wrote his term paper and he passed. But there was good things that happened too. I was going home one night after midnight and right at 10th and River there was a man laying along side a car and I stopped. I tried to give him artificial resuscitation, but I saw a bystander, I got him to call an ambulance. They said, “He was dead already when you started.” But they put a card of thanks with my name in it in the paper, that I tried. I don’t remember who it was. But you appreciate those things.

MN What did you find rewarding about being a police officer in Holland?

RB Well I had wanted to be a policeman. It started in high school, the little while I was there. They had a state policeman come in and talk about his work at an assembly. Boy I wanted to be a state policeman and that desire stuck with me. Finally in the airforce, I had been elected a constable for one year in Laketown Township, that was before World War II. When the war came they put me in the
Air Force and finally I got in the Military Police and I was promoted there on up to staff sergeant. That was where I stayed until I was discharged. I was working as commander of the guard. Commander of the Guard worked 24 hours at a stretch. You had a sergeant of the guard and a commander. They both worked 24 hours and then would be off 48, and then you would go back on and do a 24-hour duty. You could divide the night if nothing really important happened. You could go to sleep for four to five hours and then wake the other one up and take your turn. But the men I worked with almost invariable were younger than I. Or rather, one of them was older; the other ones were younger. But the older man, I'd let him have his sleep first and frequently something would happen and there would not be any time for me to sleep, but I figured that I could stick it out better. Sometimes it was mighty hard to stay awake. And other times if there was plenty of, we had a crash, we had lots of them, I guess we averaged well over one a week. Usually people were all killed, not always, but... and almost always involved take off, that is when an aircraft needs its maximum power to get in the air, and when its got the maximum load, fuel is full and the freight is all on. So they need maximum power and if anything goes wrong with an engine then, it is almost certain that is going to come down and not willfully. We had one come down and it was burning on the end of the runway and I saw it from a mile or two away that it was burning and I heard the crash sirens so I knew something had happened and then I saw the fire and knew it was on the run way, and we went down there as fast as we could get there and not a soul around, and I got as close as I could and then an officer crawled up along side of me, he was the officer of
the day, did anybody get out Bonge? I said I don’t think so. And the fuel tanks were in, it was a B24, a bomber, and I started shooting at the leading edge of the wing trying to puncture the tank because all at once I saw a stream of fire going down to the ground and then I flamed up again but get it over with, because we couldn’t get near enough maybe if they had a hole in it, maybe they wouldn’t explode, but we found out afterwards that the crew had crawled out, they got out before it caught fire, and out patrol on the air patrol had picked them all up in his command car and taken them all to the dispensary, but there was nobody to tell us who came later. That there was nobody on it. That was a good feeling.

RB I don’t know if I gave you anything you can use.

MN You gave me plenty to use.

RB You are welcome. If you have got more questions, shoot!

MN I have a few more, like what is you wife’s name?

RB Ruth DeVries. We met in 1938. I went in service in ’42, and she had told me we weren’t really going steady at the time. And she thought we lived too far apart. She says you have got to find yourself a girl around here. But I couldn’t. And she was convinced there would be not good, we could never learn to love each other, learn to get along. But she would write to me if I had to go. So she did every once in a while, I would get a letter and I would answer it, and then it would be a long time again. One time I began to realize, yes, I think it, I realized that now it didn’t bother me anymore, and I prayed about it many times. I think God finally gave me rest, it was all over. But after I mailed the letter, I realized it would never be over. But what could I do now, I had burnt my bridges, and then I
got a letter from her, and it was not time for us right. Could it be? So I tried to call her up. And I had to make a 9 o’clock bed check, and I only had two hours to try, and the circuits are busy, the circuits are busy. “We’ll call you.” Cancel the call, run to the barracks get in bed, the next night, try it again. Finally I got through.

[End Tape 2 Side A]

MN What are your children’s names?
RB Richard Allen, same as mine but I don’t have a middle name. Carol Ann, and Timothy Dean.

MN I have one more question for you… if there was anything you would want people to remember or to know, out of anything covered or might now have been, what would it be?
RB Well. I have always tried to do my duty as God gave me to see it.

[Tape Stopped while looking at pictures]

RB That was me. The bypass and 16th street. There was a gas station there were that chicken place is, across from the Burger King.

MN Right by the Wooden Shoe?
RB Right. They had broken into that vending machine, and I was trying to lift some fingerprints from it, that is a powder brush. At that time I had to work for the detectives. Towards the last of my life, I worked vacations, whoever was on vacation, I worked their beat…. We had a class by the city attorney and these were his comments on my test paper. Gord Cunningham was the attorney then.

[Tape paused while looking at pictures]
RB I'll show them to you on the way home.

MN The bullet holes? I understand that was from a bank robbery. Do you know what went on?

RB I think that was about 19...32. In 1932, I was in the class of '34, so I was in high school, but, we had a mirror upstairs in the police department and that glass was in the present one that they are still using, that was, the mirror was made from the front door glass of the First State Bank, and the First State Bank, it was still used I guess as a bank building today. Eighth and Central that corner. The chief was Peter Lievense and he was in a shoe repair shop between 9th and 10th streets on River avenue. There was a shoe repair shop next to the covered wagon; the covered wagon is now a fancier name for a tavern. Between, anyway he was in the shoe shop there that used to belong to the Unimas. Then he went, it seems to me, you better not quote me on, that he had left his gun there. But anyway, somebody said that there was a bank robbery, awww baloney. The story is true that when he had been told there was a bank robbery going on, that he walked to the front door and as he came there that fired a shot through it and he was struck in the abdomen somewhere and they got away and he later become a guard at Ionia at the Reformatory. He has a, probably a grandchild, of some relative that is an attorney now, another Peter Lievense. He's probably practicing yet although I am not sure. Because I heard, he was the defense attorney in a couple of cases that I was involved with. But he was related to the chief that got shot during the bank robbery. Supposedly a dentist, who had an office across the street, on 8th street and had a high powered rifle up there, threw in a few shots, supposedly he
went back to his native land and never appeared again, because he figured that gangsters would kill him. And how I got it, I don't know, but I heard the police radiobroadcast, there was a Holland co-op across from... it is hard to tell you just where it was. This new bank building that they are building on east 8th street, over that way, I got to orient myself every few minutes. The new building that is going up a little ways east was a co-operative, a farmers co-operative, they ground grain there for farmers, you could buy feed, wheat, corn, oats, and they had a gas pump in the yard and they had a horse stable, because a lot of farmers came from Holland with their horses, especially in the winter. But the guy who ran the gas station, is name was Abe Boueman. He had a small radio, smaller than this [demonstrates foot square with hands] but he get state police radio broadcasts on it. And that was WRDS, might still be Michigan State Police call letters. They were the first state police radio in the United States. Michigan State Police had it. But I heard the broadcast on it and they repeated it several times. "Captain Babcock, call Captain Downing at Martin." And that was in connection with the bank robbery. From newspaper accounts they new they went east from Holland. They through out roofing nails, big-headed nails you know, to puncture tires on pursuing vehicles. But they did some shooting around town. They had a sub-machine gun. The vehicle in the alley behind the bank and they went west and came out on River Avenue. And I heard that Van Hoff, the chief while I was on the department was on 7th street somewhere firing at them as they went past. I didn't see it, I got all that from... maybe you will run into the same information
from some place else and you can correlate it. And maybe you will just have to
collate it and then junk it.

MN So you also said you got you radio operator's license from Chief Van Rye?

RB No, not radio operator, driver's license, it is generally refereed to as an operator's
license.

MN Did you know chief Van Rye well or had you met him?

RB That was the only time that I know of. Seems to me he asked me "How far did
you drive" and in those days, I got it when I was 14 years old. That was the legal
age then. But everybody said, don't go in there and tell them you can drive, they
won't get a license, you can only get a license if you can drive and they want to
know how far have you driven. And you better not say a little number, tell them
several thousand miles, they just got to have something to put down. Before I
was a policeman, I had an uncle, a bachelor, and he had no car, he had never
driven a car, he didn't want a car, "they were of the devil." Horse and buggy was
good enough for him. And my brother was working in a garage just outside the
city limits on west 17th street; the building is still there. City limits used to be
Ottawa avenue; Heinz was in it because on 16th they ran a little bit through west
to get the whole Heinz Plant in. From 16th street, if you were on 16th street and
Montello Park in that area where that big marina is now. That was about the end
of the city. And then if you went up to Ottawa avenue there were South
American steamers docked there and the Alabama, and then when it got to Ottawa
there was an inter urban line just on the west side of Ottawa. You can get a lot of
information about in old Holland in a book on the Holland Inter-Urban line.
There was a teacher at Holland Christian who wrote that. But that has got
diagrams and maps in it. A book about that thick [demonstrates width]. Holland
library has got it and this guy used to work part time in the library. My son could
not stand it, but I enjoyed the book. Anyway the garage where my brother
worked had a 1928 Chevrolet that they were going to junk, so he paid for it and he
brought that out to my uncle’s place and said I am going to leave it here, you can
use it or do what you want to with it, it is your car, and finally he agreed he would
try learning it, and I offered to teach him and I knew that in order to drive you had
to get a beginner’s permit, a learners permit. So I took him to Allegan, because
he lived in Laketown Township we had to go to Allegan to get it. I ask for a
learner’s permit. The deputy at the desk he was gruff and nasty “we don’t give
them, we don’t monkey with that stuff.” If he wants a driver’s license okay, lets
go out. My uncle had never, maybe I had one time I had showed him, but I
wouldn’t show him on anything about driving on the road because he did not have
a permit, and I said he had to get a permit, and here he got that perception, “you
show me how you can drive. Where is your car.” He got in with him, and of
course it was a flop. And I wrote a letter to the secretary of state telling the
deputy’s name, when it happened, what happened, the reception. And I got a
letter from the secretary of state thanking me and assuring me that the deputy
would not be issuing any more driver’s license, that I was right, and he sent me a
book for him to learn, and we got him a license, properly, after he already had
permission to drive with a licensed operator. And when I was first here in
Holland they issued the licenses at the police department and for years it was done
that way and I became, I was not an official examiner, I could not sign the applications but I could do everything else. Then one of the sergeants said to the chief “it isn’t fair that you make him work for us, and he has to do all that, why don’t you get him appointed as an examiner, so he could sign them for himself, and not have to do all our work. And one day I did it the way they taught me. It says on there “I swear or affirm that the statements contained and answers contained here on are true, so help me God.” Nobody ever did that. They just sign it, give them the license and I was doing that. And there were three young fellows standing in the back corner, when no body else was around he walked up to me and he said, “I noticed you didn’t swear anyone in.” No they never told me I had to. Well it says that here. None of the others do. I say who are you? “Lars Siberson. I am from the secretary of state’s office. I used to be a state policemen.” But he said from now on, you have to do that. “Will you tell the other examiners?” But why? “Because,” he said. When we take some one into court, they have their driver’s license suspended in which they do swore that this was you name and that you never had this or that, or you ever had you license suspended, revoked or denied. ‘I never swore to that,’ we have not got a leg to stand on. They can laugh in our face, so that is why just being printed there doesn’t mean a thing if you don’t tell them to raise you right hand. Okay, from then on we did it. I never skipped, if it was a person that I knew personally, I would not say to you “Do you swear or affirm that you are Nickel, because I know who that is, but the statements and answers contained here in are true,” never had any kick back, not a bit. [End of Tape]