7-23-1997

Bradford, Catharine Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Catharine Bradford

Conducted July 23, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Catharine Bradford
July 23, 1997
Interviewer: Ann Paeth

AP: The first thing I have everyone do is state your name and where and when you were born.

CB: OK. I'm Catharine Dunning Bradford, born in Duluth, Minnesota, a long time ago, [month removed], 1928, and spent most of my youth in St. Paul, Minnesota. I went away for college, went back and graduated from the University of Minnesota, worked for Northwest Airlines in Chicago, married, moved back to St. Paul with husband and, eventually, three sons, and ended up in Holland, Michigan in August of '56.

AP: What did you study in school?

CB: Political science with a history minor.

AP: What did you do when you worked for Northwest?

CB: Reservations, tickets. It was before jets, it was before O'Hare. That was when Midway Airport was the center of the world.

AP: Let's talk a little bit about how and why you came to Holland.

CB: My family was rooted in the Twin Cities, and Jud's family was in Chicago. They're in the packaging business, and they had vacationed since, I think, before 1900 at Macatawa with a cottage. He had spent his every summer up here. When he got to be a big boy, he worked at Heinz one summer from the cottage. The company in Chicago needed to make a move for some more space, as I understand it, and they bought what is, as of this year, the Vanderbilt Academy on 16th and Van Raalte.
That was the building they bought when they decided to move to Holland. The company, at that point, was Jud's father and his two uncles. His brother came and didn't stay too long in Holland. He had a southern wife who didn't do well with winter. They left, and the call was for Jud to come. We turned it down once. He was with Pillsbury in the financial or the accounting, he does numbers, budgeting. It was just when he left, to show you how old I am, refrigerated rolls were being considered. They came out with that orange sweet roll. Anyway, the Twin Cities are very exciting, and Chicago is very exciting, and somehow we found ourselves in Holland, Michigan.

AP: Big change?

CB: Big change.

AP: What did you think of this place when you first showed up?

CB: You see, I'd seen it from summers, as a vacationer doing very little.

AP: In the resort community, which is a lot different than being a citizen.

CB: You bet it is, it's a lot different. Holland was a nice, easy little community, as far as I could tell. But Jud and I were pretty used to big cities. The availability of a lot of things—even with Grand Rapids, were not available. We've spent a lot of times in Grand Rapids.

AP: Availability of products or events...

CB: Sporting events, symphony orchestras, theater... All stuff that we went to without even considering, oh, it's going to be in town for three days. It's always in town, if you're in a big city. That was really very different. We came to a very tight knit
community. As I told you when you called me, I don’t think you’ll ever be a native of this community unless you graduate from the high school and know whose sister-in-law somebody is. Holland couldn’t have been a better place to raise three boys. It’s a little behind, and that’s alright. It’s just been a wonderful place to have youngsters. Two of our boys live in Holland, and one never got any further than Kalamazoo. He went to MSU, did his medical school at Stanford, and did his residency at Mass. General, married a Connecticut girl when he was at Stanford, so they’ve got both coasts going for them, and how they happened to come back to Kalamazoo has been a delight. They say the same thing. They are so glad they aren’t on either coast. The life is so much faster. I love the midwest. I am a midwesterner. When we go south for time in the winter to Florida—I love the midwest. I love the climate change. I am a midwesterner.

AP: It seems the other two coasts just forget there is this whole middle part of the United States.

CB: I think they do, indeed. We’ve been very lucky to have our youngsters here. It’s been a neat place. Particularly, I guess the friends I would relate to are my Minnesota friends from college and high school, wherever, not that the trouble hasn’t happened here, and they’re good people, it’s different raising kids in a big city. A couple of them have had some trouble with it, and it didn’t seem to be a problem here for me. The kids were at dangerous ages during Vietnam and the changing lifestyle that was going on.

AP: Did that affect Holland much?
CB: I think so. I think we saw people coming back. The crime increased, the drugs started. I guess I'd put it all about that time of a rebellious 60s.

AP: That was really a big turning point for America?

CB: Yes, and here. I think we caught up very quickly.

AP: I've talked to a lot of people, and we talk about how different it is for kids today compared to when they were kids, and today they have to deal with drugs and alcohol, and it never really was an issue. It's hard to imagine how it happened.

CB: I see our kids going through it with their children. It's hard. Drugs were in our boys era, without question.

AP: Did you have to address that as a parent?

CB: No, we just flew through it, fortunately. But we were lucky. The boys have always done a lot of athletics. They've been busy. I think athletics has a lot to do with keeping you away from that. We grew up with alcohol, and that was there. They all went to Michigan State, and our youngest came back and graduated from Hope.

AP: Those must have been very different experiences for him.

CB: I think so. He was having such a good time at State, that he came one day and he said, "I can't go back there. I don't study." He was the president of every extra curricular activity he could find. He loved fraternity life and the whole thing. He came back here and he did better with his studying. He got at it. He was very young when he started college, so that could have hurt, too.

AP: Here is you aren't in class a couple of days, professors are calling you personally to ask where you are.
CB: I have heard that. I don’t know. I assume he went to class. (laughs)

AP: I had a friend who had a problem of constantly oversleeping her first class, and finally her professor called her and said, I noticed you’re not in class a lot, I’m in my office by eight or so every morning, I could just give you a wake up call if you like.

CB: That doesn’t happen at Michigan State. That is something. That is quite a lovely offer. I went to a very small college, my first college. They keep their eye on you without question.

AP: What kind of role does Hope have in this community?

CB: This town would be lost without Hope College, in my mind. I think it’s particularly, in the last few years, the broadened base of scholars and teachers they’ve brought in that have been from all over, and not necessarily conformists. We would have been very unhappy without Hope. We’ve enjoyed our friendships with people from there, and we’ve done concerts and plays and all kinds of nice things because of Hope. It just enriches the community tremendously. I hear all this monkey business about the area center and that Hope College is calling the shots. We ought to listen to what Hope College thinks, I think. They are really important to the outgrowth of this community.

AP: They’re right in the heart of the city there.

CB: They just add so much breadth. Hope is important. We don’t use Hope every few minutes, but we’ve enjoyed our relationships with the college.

AP: Have you gone to a lot of productions there? You mentioned before that there was not as much theater moving to a small town.
CB: We’ve always done the summer theater and go to things off and on during the winter. For years we were subscription holder to the Grand Rapids Symphony. But we’ve given that up. Our life has changed with age. We’re doing a little more time in Florida, and that is winter stuff, and we just were missing concerts all the time. So that, too, is now individual ticket. But that’s been important.

AP: What kind of artistic community have you seen in Holland outside of Hope? Is there a good artistic community, are there other events?

CB: I think so. We lived across the street from Dorothy DeLong, who started dance. I did dance at college, I love dance. It’s been taken over by Maxine DeBruyn, and Max has been a friend of mine. We’ve had fun. She’s a neat lady and she’s got a neat husband, we like them. I love the dance. I haven’t seen a lot of the dance here. I guess the one thing I don’t like is opera, and it’s because I don’t know anything about it. But I ought to do something about it, but I haven’t gotten to that yet.

AP: I think you have to know a lot about it to really enjoy it.

CB: I love my book club which I’m in. They make me read things that I probably don’t want to read. My brother and sister are always asking me of what we’re reading and giving good names out. I’ve got a couple of friends in the Twin Cities that own bookstores and are pushing good things toward me.

AP: Since we’re kind of talking about the community, are there other activities that you have been involved in?

CB: With AAUW, the American Association of University Women. Very small group at the point that I got into it. A lot of Hope College and a lot of the teachers from the
community. That was wonderful way to get to know some of the teacher that my children were about to have or did have. But AAUW grew and grew and a lot of nice people got in it, and that’s been that basis of friendships all the way through. In the first couple of years that I was in AAUW, somebody came in, and then suddenly we had a lot more members. That was nice. That’s probably where I met Max. I don’t think she was attached to Hope dance at that moment, but she started that religious dance at Hope Church, the sacred dance. I did that for a bit. But I had a bad knee, and that cut out my career. Hope’s been important for us. Jud has worked, a couple years ago, he did, I believe it was the community fund raising for Hope. He enjoyed that. He has participated for years.

AP: You mentioned getting to know some of your sons’ teachers. What schools did they go to?

CB: Very common path. They all went to Cherry Lane Nursery School, to Longfellow School, E. E. Fell, and Holland High. We stayed in our house on 22nd Street until the youngest had finished sixth grade, because Longfellow was so important. Really good, solid stable school. Good solid staff. There were very few new teachers, and it was a core that worked so well together under two very good principals. Esther Kooyers was a long time principal, and then Jane Lampen, who was a marvelous lady, who had been the third and fourth grade teacher for the two oldest boys. She was principal by the time our youngest boy got there. But it was a really good, solid staff.

AP: And then on to Holland High. Did they have good experiences with that school, too?
CB: Yes, Holland High was alright. Not very adventurous.

AP: We talked about when you came here. What are some of the biggest changes that you've seen since you've been here?

CB: People. The number of people. I'll tell you what happened, I think more people who had some advanced education. A lot of the women, when I came here first, people that I met, were high school graduates. I liked them, that's not to say... but I think maybe this community was slow to send their girl children to college, and that certainly has happened. They're going very much. Maybe I'm wrong on that, I don't know that. Maybe it was people that I hadn't met. Our first friends here, there was not a lot of education in the women. Lots of diversity now. Funny names, like Polish. (laughs) And not all starting with Ter and Van. A lot of diversity in the community. We were aware, even with our youngest son, who graduated in '76 from high school, of the Hispanic influence, which, of course, has just blossomed. There were no Asiatics when we came. There were, truly, no blacks. I think one black was in our middle son's class. If there were blacks in the area, as far as I know, there were a couple of them in the West Ottawa district. St. Paul, where I grew up, was a very Catholic city. Not here, not so. I have met a lot of them since.

AP: Yes, it seems that the Catholic segment of the population has grown a lot in the past years.

CB: Just booming. I grew up with a lot of Lutherans. You have to fight to get a Lutheran in Holland. (laughs) Just a very different base of people. I grew up with a lot of people who had a great sense of humor. I don't think the Dutch are
particularly funny people.

AP: They’re very stoic people.

CB: Norwegians are funny, they’re just plain funny, they have a great sense of humor. Probably the Swedes, too, but I knew more Norwegians than Swedes. A lot of just plain funny things, I don’t think Dutch people get. They just don’t think it’s funny. That’s been a source of remorse for me. I love to laugh, I love clever things, witty things. But you do conform.

AP: Just as a side note, then I bet you really enjoy Max’s and Linda’s choreography a lot, because of that.

CB: Yes. When I went back to Rockford a few years back, I saw my dance teacher back there. I love dance, she was wonderful to me. It’s been nice. I don’t see Max often, but we’re very glad to see one another when we do.

AP: So the size has changed…

CB: And with the size, you get all this stuff. The schools grow. The traffic grows. From a quiet little community, we’re getting to be a little bit of a bustling community. I think the community, despite some of the displeasure with it, owes an amount to the Prince donation to the community. It just cannot be underestimated. He saved downtown, and there are so many communities that are so sick. I just left St. Paul. I didn’t get down town, but the last time I was there, it was just sky walks and bustling. Now the downtown merchandising area is 40-50% empty.

AP: I’m in a town with a downtown like that. A lot of people want to know what Holland has done to get the things like the downtown and Evergreen Commons.
CB: They had an angel.

AP: Right, those things function on their own now, but somebody had to come in and put the money in in the first place and get it all fixed up to where a business could come in and be successful. Without that…

CB: That, and when you move to Grand Rapids, there’s a flow off in here of DeVoss and VanAndel. They have been wonderful community people. They have really made a solid base, as far as I can tell. I’m terribly sorry people can’t get to the light house. I think that ought to be worked out with VanAndel, I don’t know why that’s that way. I guess if you have billions of dollars, you do need some protection, but… That hurts me a lot. In fact, it’s a great gripe to me that the citizens of this community that are four to five miles from a really big lake, it’s hard to get to it. Boats are one way of access, but it would seem to me that somehow you should be able to get out of a car and walk and find a beach with it this close. There’s something wrong with that.

AP: There’s a definite issue there. I think a lot of people feel that way. And it’s sad about Big Red, that’s a well known light house.

CB: You know, when I first came, it was sort of a creamy yellow color. Big Red was not Big Red.

AP: I see in gift catalogs sometimes these light house collections and Big Red is in there.

CB: I have one with a light in it. It beckons me home in Florida. It’s the Light Houses of America or something like that. But we have always had a boat connection. Most of our life we’ve had some kind of a little something. So we’ve gotten on the water. From someone who has gotten so much from the water, I would like everyone to be
able to share in that. I think it’s a really big part of... I don’t know, but the park ought to get more--this park’s just always too crowded. People should be able to get a hot dog and a hamburger and go out and have fire and sit at a beach.

AP: It’s such a beautiful area, everyone should be able to enjoy it.

CB: It’s the reason for the beautiful area, I think, because Holland itself is not real pretty. It’s pretty flat. You look for a hill, and they call the hill the one at the hospital. When our boys were little, we asked where to go sledding. "You go to the hill." Well, where’s "the hill?" It’s that slight elevation that goes up near the hospital, and they used to slide there. There’s a medical building there now. Then, of course, there was the Country Club, and they all slid out there. But that meant mom and dad had to get them there. The hill at the hospital was a walkable function.

AP: When you were raising your kids, what was your neighborhood like?

CB: Stiff but wonderful. Minister next door from Trinity Reformed. Minister across the street from First Reformed, when it was still down on 9th Street. Minister over on College Avenue, Christian Reformed. Christian Reformed families around us, and Reformed families. The Christian school population was there, and our best baby sitters were a family from the Christian Reformed Church. They were neat people. I keep in touch with them to this day. Wonderful family. Our youngsters were the odd lot. They went out on Sundays. In fact, our oldest two boys were brought home in a squad car one Sunday. They walked down to the 22nd Street tennis courts... I didn’t know that was a no-no. They were brought home in a squad car.

AP: When was that?
CB: They were six and eight maybe. Maybe 1960. Holland’s changed. When we came, there were three theaters. There was the Center, and the Holland Theater on 8th, and then the Park around the corner. Center disappeared soon. Park had an off and on life for quite a long time. It hasn’t been too long that the Holland turned over to the Knickerbocker, ten years, fifteen years.

AP: We were just talking about the church. What church did your family attend?

CB: We go to Grand Rapids, to Fountain Street. That’s a very small group in Holland. Possibly, at the most, ten to twelve. I was brought up, after an early life as a Presbyterian, I joined the Unitarian Church. My husband was brought up as an Episcopalian, and we were married in the Unitarian Church in St. Paul. My minister in St. Paul said, "When you go to Holland, there’s nothing there for you, but you go to Grand Rapids and go to Fountain Street Baptist Church." I said, "Not a Baptist Church!" He said, yes. So Fountain Street was a member of the Baptist group at that point and left. But that’s always made a difference for us. That’s probably divided us from the community, but it’s been important to us to have it.

AP: How does it differ.

CB: Well, it’s Unitarian and these are all Trinitarian. It’s creedless. Here, it’s set in stone. Pretty free thinking up there where I go. Magnificent musical church. Wonderful choir, wonderful music.

AP: So were people in the community…

CB: Difficult? Some of them.

AP: Because you were going to that different church? Has that lessened a lot thorough the
years?

CB: I think when we came here, probably the first thing that was said to you was, "What church do you go to?" I probably hemmed and hawed, and they were always genial, and always caring, and they said, "Please come to our church." And I knew that their church wasn't where I could be. I couldn't have handled one of these churches. It never would have been a happy church for me. Good friends of ours as the boys were growing up was the second minister of the Presbyterian Church here, Bill Burd, who we are still in contact with, and see their children and them. They were good friends. They were wonderful to us. So if we had a local connection, it was probably with the Presbyterian Church. Jud's family, however, that was here, were Episcopalians and they were at Grace. Very, very different religious community. But, yes, it's changed a lot. Things that I would never have considered doing on a Sunday, people do them on Sunday. People go out of their houses for purposes other than church, which is truly very different. It was Sunday morning and Sunday night church. Our little boys were out. I don't feel it's a bad thing to do, that's part of it. I don't think that playing basketball in your own back yard is bad.

The newspaper has made a lot of difference. It has gone from a very small town newspaper, to you can get the national news service out of it. There is not as much, who had a tea party and what was served.

AP: Probably there used to be very few people covering everything?

CB: I think so. It was very community, and didn't get much outside the community. You sort of had to read it to know what was happening. The admissions and discharges
from the hospitals were all printed.

AP: Someone told me parking and speeding tickets were printed.

CB: Oh yes. You knew everybody that had done everything. You knew everyone's age, what color flowers they had on the table for their birthday party. We had some disrespectful friends who called up and put in their dog's birthday party, and put in the list of the neighborhood dogs that came to it, and it was printed, not knowing it was a dog, but their dog's name was Missy. But the paper has changed. I don't know what the word gossip means, but it's no longer at that level. It's sort of a grown up newspaper. That's been a nice change. You had any speeding ticket, lots of information that I would not be willing to have others know, if I had my way.

AP: Have there been any issues or controversies within the community?

CB: Lots of them. I have a friend now gone, but she was from the deep south. She used to talk a lot about the old boy's network. Awfully hard for a woman to have a voice. We owe some big things, as women, I believe, to the female school superintendent, Gladys Bishop, and to a couple of women, Bee Westrate is one I think of, that ran for council. The school board was really a no-no, I feel, for a woman for a long time. Awfully hard to break the old Dutch male world, but I think that has been broken. I've been connected with some nice organizations in which women have been respected.

The Holland Community Foundation, which, as I was on it, got interested in and was accepted by the Kellog Foundation, so that money started to come in to the Community Foundation. The Community Foundation was here when I came, and it
lived a very sad life for a lot of years, and then suddenly it blossomed forth. During the early blossoming, I was there, and that was really exciting. I was on, as was my husband, on the YMCA Board in Holland. The YMCA could never quite make it in Holland. Good people, good ideas, didn’t work. Therefore, not too long ago, late 80s, I was on the Boys’ and Girls’ Club, which I think has just been totally necessary, like the city ought to fund it. I don’t know if they know what that group is doing for them. I think they’re so important.

AP: What kind of things do they do?

CB: It’s part of what the YMCA’s thought, but the youth groups within the churches accepted only the church’s people, and there were a lot of people that didn’t fit into church programs, and those people had no place to do this outside program, which is Saturday basketball and trips to here, there and the other place. The Y did it without need for church relationship, and certainly the Boys and Girls Club has no requirements, and they are getting at a core of kids that aren’t touched by the stable church that’s here. Really important. There’s a great big bunch in this community that is not part of the old community, and they need some attention.

AP: A lot of people that have been here for a long time would be surprised to hear someone say this, and I don’t think this is just in Holland, that for a lot of kids there’s something not too cool about church youth group. I never went. I had other activities… (tape ends)

CB: I don’t know how big Holland is. People ask me how big is Holland, and I think back to 16,000 or 15,000 which is what it was when we came, but I know it’s…” But
who are we talking about, city of Holland, or this great expanse, like the north side. That’s Holland, as far as I’m concerned. Goodness sakes, that’s just explosive. Our two boys have moved over there. Holland is physically quite contained. This thing that’s going on about Fillmore addition and stuff to make it’s boundaries bigger is quite interesting. But when we came here, there could have been an annexation of the north side, and it was a big fight. Unpleasant, I guess.

AP: What do you think of the core city of Holland, which used to be when Holland was founded where everybody lives?

CB: I think the people that live in there are trying to keep up those great huge homes painted and I think it’s absolutely charming. I know what you’re talking about, 9th Street and surrounding. All of these housing programs are going to make a difference. Some of them have been done well, and some of them I’m sure they’d like to raze and start all over again. There are centers of crime area. It’s what they can afford.

AP: What do you think about the city of Holland and its government? Are they doing all the things they should be doing to address the problems of the city? Are there things that they haven’t but they should have? how are they doing?

CB: I think they sure flubbed this area thing. I think they jumped before they should. Having served on various city commissions, I think it is not very impressive to get a bunch of citizens to work on something, and then just say, "Oh, well that’s not the way we’re going to do it." I think that’s going to hurt in getting citizens involved in other commissions. I don’t think that went well. If you want to hear what the
people want, you better listen. And I’m not sure that they did. I don’t know about
the disruption of forty to fifty houses around the old plant up on the rail road tracks,
but I think Hope College should be listened to. I think people resent the idea that
they’ve got a big old garbage dump, I don’t know what you want to call it on 6th and
7th Street, because of the owners of it right now. People are afraid that they’re going
to make a buck off it. Maybe they should.

AP: Does it seem the city’s worried too much right now with all these expansive projects
instead of doing some community programs?

CB: I don’t know what program is not represented. But much of it’s done privately. A
lot of it, I’m glad is done privately. I don’t know where the holes are right now.
Something that really concerns me, and I’ve been a volunteer at the hospital and one
of the original member of the Margaret Hummer Guild, and we’ve given more money
to the hospital than any other group. We have had a terrific money making project,
and it’s ongoing. We aren’t giving it up, and we should. We do the baby pictures,
and it makes a lot of money, and we turn it all over back to the hospital. So I have
been involved, I work every Monday at the hospital. I am concerned about this
community health center, that it didn’t start when I thought it was going to start in
March. I want to see that thing up and going. I don’t know if the word indigent is
always going to be used with it, but right now it’s in offices across from the hospital.
That is really important. I don’t know what the city’s stand is on that. I don’t know
if they give money to it. But I know it’s a great need. It’s not just helping those
people, it’s a great big bonus for the city if we have healthy citizens, rather than
sickly citizens. I suppose that’s an area that we aren’t doing a lot with, probably with the poor and indigent. That’s pretty much with the hands of separate agencies. But the health concerns, and that community health center, they need money. I don’t know how long the hospital will underwrite it. I think they’ve got one more year left on their original commitment to it. I suppose private funds will back it, but that is something we need. I think the support of the Boys’ and Girls’ Club, the expansiveness of that, is terrific. I just let them go, and they’re doing more than their job. They’re doing well. That’s the youth problem. The gang problem, I don’t know anything about it, fortunately. It boggles my mind. I don’t know what you do about it. Obviously, the sociologists don’t either. Evergreen, of course, has been just a bonanza. I wonder if Evergreen really speaks to the whole older population, and if they don’t, I think it’s not from lack of trying. I think they really try to be open to everyone. I’m not sure that everyone takes advantage of them. It’s a magnificent facility. I think it’s too bad that some of our disability people have to be transported huge miles to receive benefits, like Kent County. I think that Life Services System is just doing a neat job. They need money. I’m sort of interested in the social programs in the area. But I don’t think anything I’m saying is just Holland. This is everywhere you go.

AP: What it sounds like is Holland used to be a community very small and close knit, and could function on its own, because everybody knew everybody, which had good aspects and bad aspects, which we’ve talked about.

CB: And they took care of their own.
AP: Now that it’s growing, that’s got good aspects too, but this old way of life doesn’t work in a big community.

CB: This is not the same community. We used to have the choice of going out to dinner to the Vogue, which was on River and 8th. Look at all these fast places that you can eat in the world now around here. Holland has just leaps and bounds grown in the diversity of the people. It has made it a different community. That’s not all bad. It’s not all good. It was a very great place the way it used to be. I don’t know about raising children here now. Out kids are doing it, and they’re doing it well. There are a lot of opportunities for our grandchildren that were not available to our youngsters, but on the other hand, our youngsters possibly became more inventive. The boys would disappear in the morning and come home with a goldfish at night, or whatever they’d done, and a sack lunch on their backs. I don’t know if their kids can do that. I don’t know if their parents would feel safe having them do that. That’s a dark shadow, I suspect, everywhere.

AP: Well, thank you very much for your time.