Counihan, Jerry Oral History Interview:
Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Annette Daly

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Oral History Interview with
Jerry Counihan

Conducted March 18, 1997
by Annette Daly

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
AD: Good morning, Jerry.

JC: Good morning, Annette.

AD: You want to tell us something about your background, where you were born? If not in Holland, where?

JC: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and my family moved to Manhattan when I was one year old. We stayed there until about 1927 and we moved to Freeport, Long Island, which was a small community on the south shore of Long Island, about twenty miles east of Manhattan. You want me to go on to the other parts of where I've lived? Is that your point?

AD: You could tell us how you met and spouse and about your children.

JC: I went to the armed service in 1946 and I was a GI in the Army of Occupation in Tokyo. I was part of a technical intelligence unit which was part of G2. Lynn, the gal that I married, was a document analyst at the War Trials in Tokyo. We were both interested in the theater and I met her through the theater. We got married when we both returned to the states in 1949. And we were married in Minneapolis, Minnesota. At the same time, I was transferred by American Cyanamid from the New York office to the Chicago office so we found an apartment on the south side of Chicago in 1949, which incidentally was a good trick because apartments at that time were very difficult to get. We lived there for about a year and we found that there
was a new high rise apartment on Lakeshore Drive, 1360 Lakeshore Drive, and after a year we moved into that apartment and we stayed there for five years. At the end of that period I was transferred to Minneapolis as a regional manager. But when I got settled in the job - I was a salesman for pigments for American Cyanamid, incidentally - I was quite dissatisfied with the arrangement and I wanted more managerial responsibility. So I looked around and it turned out that there was a spot open as a sales manager with Holland Color & Chemical in Holland, Michigan. This small company was a unit of the Chemetron Corporation which was based in Chicago. So I moved right away, which was I think June of '56, and Lynn and Kevin did not move until some time in October because we had difficulty selling our home. But they did finally come and we rented an apartment from Ken and Jane O’Meara on Graafschap Road. We stayed there for about a year, I believe, and then we bought a home on East 28th Street which was directly across the street from Betty and Clarence Becker and right next door to Judge Ray Smith. We stayed there for, I think it was five or six years, and then bought the home that I’m currently living in at 50 East 28th Street.

AD: What were some of your early impressions of Holland? And the difference between Minneapolis and Chicago compared to Holland.

JC: Well, of course, Holland as you would expect is a very small town. At that time a highly conservative town which is the most striking aspect of the city that I had because Chicago and New York and Minneapolis were obviously much larger and cities and they had a much more highly diverse culture than Holland. Holland was a
single Dutch culture, highly religious and highly conservative. Everything was closed on Sunday. You did not mow your lawn, water your lawn, wash your car, do any work on the outside on Sunday at that particular time. I remember a story that my wife Lynn used to tell that was really indicative of the town at that time. It was a Sunday afternoon in the summer time and Lynn was out on the front lawn picking dandelions. A little girl from down the block, who was brought up in the Christian Reformed Church, walked up to her and said, "You’re not supposed to pick flowers on Sunday." And Lynn said, "Why not? God grows them on Sunday too." So the little girl didn’t quite know what to say and went home. I guess she posed that question to her father. But that’s the way the town was at that time. Gas stations, there were probably one or two open in the whole city. Everything was closed down. Obviously the movies were closed and they didn’t serve liquor here, of course, so it was highly conservative. But the interesting part about that particular time, which was 1956, was the General Electric Company came here in 1955. They brought with them a quite large contingent of engineers and sales people from various sections of the country. Obviously, these people had the greatest initial impact on changing the city than of any other group that I know of. Ab Martin who was the general manager of the General Electric plant had told his people that reported to him what the city was like and that he expected that all the employees would conform to the mores of the town and not set up anything different. And also they should become involved in the various activities in the city. Well, these young fellows were very eager. They wanted to get ahead and make a name for themselves and it wasn’t too long before
they had almost every important post in the City of Holland! So they had a really positive impact on the city, although I’m sure that the local people at the time did not appreciate that.

AD: You don’t think the public reacted well to the changes in Holland?

JC: Well, I don’t know. I think they reacted all right. They talked among themselves. I remember one fellow that I knew who was Christian Reformed said, "Well, we like these people at General Electric because they do our work for us." In other words, they take the job and do all the work in running the city and in all of the various posts that are available to people. But that was their general feeling. Let them run the city, do all the work, but we’ll control the rest of it, the mores and everything.

AD: How did you feel that the Dutch heritage interacts with other cultures now in the community?

JC: I think over all they interact very well. One of the surprising aspects of this whole picture of interacting is the way that the Hispanic people have been accepted in Holland. This is a completely foreign culture to the Dutch people who lived here with...their ancestors either came over from the Netherlands or they were brought here, so they know nothing but really for the most part the City of Holland. And they have absorbed the Hispanic people very well.

AD: Now in your business career, I know that you faced some difficult situations at Chemetron and one of them was the strike. Would you like to tell us a little bit about the strike at Chemetron?

JC: The strike occurred in 1978. The union was the Teamsters Union, Local 406. They
had changed the business manager at that time. Previously to that we had two other contracts with the Teamsters and we had absolutely no trouble with them. But this new business manager was a real trouble maker and we knew right at the start, even before we started negotiations, we saw and studied what he had done to various companies in Grand Rapids and we knew that we were going to have a long and bitter strike with this fellow. And it turned out that way. The strike lasted three months. There was violence. We had Wackenhut guards, which was controversial, until people understood why we had the guards. We maintained the plant. We had people working in the plant, not only the plant salaried personnel but we had personnel from the office and from the sales department, from the research department, all came in and went into production to get out the pigments. At the end of three months, we had what is known in labor parlance as an impasse. We had reached an impasse with the Local 406, and under those conditions we were then able to hire non-union people. We got a very good response to our ad and that essentially turned the strike around. The first day, about two union members showed up and then the following day there were about three, and following that everybody came back in because they could see that they were going to lose their jobs if they didn’t report early. That strike was over and the men in the plant, these union men who had done without their wages for three months, were very, very bitter toward this fellow, Don Deters and they de-certified the union. So as a result they do not have a union at the plant now. One of the first things I did when the strike was over and the union was de-certified was I removed all the time clocks in the plant because I always felt that was an unfair
imposition on the people who worked in the plant. If the people in the office could come and go and report to work without using a time clock, I saw no reason why the people in the plant couldn’t do the same, and it turned out that way.

AD: Would you like to tell a little bit about the clubs and organizations that you and your family belonged to when you first moved here and the ones that developed while you lived here?

JC: Well, you have to understand that when I came here and for I guess in almost all of my career, I was outside of the city fifty percent of the time. I worked a week in town, a week out of town. I was always home on Friday night and did not leave again until Monday morning. So the involvement in the city on a personal basis was Lynn’s really rather than mine. She became very involved in AAUW, League of Women Voters, and many others...the Garden Club, Book Club. She was extremely active in club work in town. She really had a greater impact in the town than I did. The first organization that I remember we belonged to was the Newcomers Club. That was very active at the time and we met a lot of people who had come to town and were in the same position we were, trying to get settled and acclimated to this area. So that was a very good club. We eventually were asked to join the Century Club which was a great honor to us we felt because we got to know and become very friendly with many people who were born in Holland that we never would have gotten to associate with and to know otherwise. I belong to the Rotary Club. Later on I did a lot more club work than I did when I first came to Holland.

AD: Would you like to expand a little on the club work or the volunteer work that you’ve
JC: Well, I was a volunteer in Hospice and on the board for six years. I got off the board at the end of six years because my term was up. But with the death of Lynn I was not able to be a bereavement counselor, although I may take that up again some time in the near future. I’m a member of SCORE, which is Service Core of Retired Executives, that give advice to people who either have current business problem or are attempting to start a business of their own. I’m on the Board of Directors of Herrick Library, I am vice president of HASP, the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals. I’m in the Rotary Club. I guess there must be others. I can’t think of them at this time. One of the things you might be interested in that I’ve quite proud of was starting the literacy program under the aegis of the Rotary Club. That was very successful. Several volunteers and they did excellent work.

AD: I have a question here about the problems facing the general citizens of Holland in the last forty years. Do you think they’ve changed in forty years since you’ve been here. Is the crime different?

JC: Oh, I think there has been an increase in crime with the increase of new people coming into the area. As the city grew industrially and the demand for labor increased, then it was necessary for the people who ran the various businesses to go out and get people to come in and work. As a result, you got not a large element but a small element of what I would consider undesirable people. But that is part of growing. And while there are big write-ups and headlines in the paper about the crimes and shootings and that sort of stuff, it’s really relatively minor.
AD: Are there any other problems of Holland that you would care to comment about?

JC: Well, the greatest problem I see is the growth. It's growing by leaps and bounds and to control the growth and then keep the quality of living in Holland at the same time is very difficult, if not an impossible situation.

AD: What do you make of the industry in Holland? What affect it has on the community and would you like to speculate on how Holland would have been without it?

JC: Well, without the industry there wouldn't be a Holland. It would be just a farming community. But we've had industry here in Holland for, I don't know the late 1800s I would guess. Heinz, which has the tremendous pickle factory, has been here a long time and there are companies that have come like the piano company and various other woodworking companies that were here, made an impact, and they lost the market for one reason or another and they failed. But the city fathers or the men who were influential in the city were very smart and far seeing and they started this HEDCOR in which they bought pieces of property around Holland and enticed industry to come in. That gave them an opportunity to select the industry and they did an excellent job with that. We have very, very fine companies in this town, very solid in all respects, and they're all a great asset to the city and they are environmentally very positive.

AD: Would you tell us a little bit about how you felt Holland reacted to the wars while you were here - the Vietnam War, the Korean War, Desert Storm - and how that affected the town.

JC: Well, this is a very, as you know and as I said before, highly conservative,
Republican county and town. They back the government 100% in all the wars. The Korean War should have been questioned a great deal and it wasn’t. The Vietnam War stirred tremendous controversy throughout the country, but I didn’t notice any great controversy here. There was some small movement but nothing of any significance. And the Gulf War, I would say, was a popular war with everybody. They thought they were going to cream Saddam Hussein and they did so you know they overwhelmed them.

AD: Your wife, Lynn, was very active in town. How do you think the role of women has changed in the last forty years since you’ve been here?

JC: The role of women here has followed the rest of the country in that you now have the man and the women working, and as a result of that the women’s clubs here in town are in serious trouble because the women just have so much time in the day they can’t be in the clubs the way they used to and still hold down a full time job and then raise children on top of that. So that impact of two partners working, which is prevalent throughout the United States, is also true here.

AD: What have you heard about Holland from other people who have visited or have lived here and moved away?

JC: Well, that’s an interesting question. When I made my change from New York-Chicago-Minneapolis and came to Holland, Michigan, and then I would go to New York City to see friends and customers, they were absolutely aghast that I would be in a place called Holland, Michigan. They couldn’t see how anybody could live there. But was sheer ignorance on their part because they’d never known the kind of
life that you live in a town like this. These people were in New York City and they
work in New York City and live in Connecticut and they have an hour and a half
commutation each way, three hours a day, and they think it’s terrible to live in a
small town which is, you know, crazy. What else was that you asked?

AD: Well, expand a little on the reason why Holland is a good place to live or why you
have stayed here all these years.

JC: The people in HASP - there are a lot of retired people obviously. They belong there.
Many of them have lived in Holland, moved away and then when they retired they
came back and are perfectly delighted to be back. It’s a great community, it’s not
overcrowded as yet. Everything is really at your fingertips. The whole atmosphere
of the city is nice. It’s clean, it’s well-run. And as far as bringing up children, you
can’t find a better place in my judgment than to do it here. We did it very
successfully with Kevin. The people who come in as visitors, after they spend a little
time even though they’re from New York or some other place, just are very
impressed with it. But I might add that the Holland that I know today is much, much
different than the Holland that I knew in 1956.

AD: In what ways?

JC: Well, it’s more of an open city. In other words, they have movies on Sunday now.
You can go to a restaurant and order a drink which you couldn’t do before. You had
to go to a private club. It’s much more cosmopolitan than it was, and yet it’s not too
much so.

AD: Have you noticed a generation gap in Holland? Do you want to elaborate on that at
JC: Generation gap...Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't see much of a generation gap.

AD: The family situations, are they good? Or bad?

JC: Well, the family situations overall are good I would say. When you talk about family situations that becomes very personal and people can have a rough family situation and you really wouldn't know it. Maybe you want something more general than that. I don't know. I think the people here are quite stable for the most part.

AD: In your life, you've lived a long time, and you look back over it, has there been a major turning point in your life that you felt was important and you'd like to talk about?

JC: I think there are many turning points in one's life if you want to take enough time to examine it. I would say that probably the greatest turning point in my life is when I left American Cyanamid and joined Holland Color & Chemical. I was 39 at the time and in my judgement, whether it was right or wrong, I felt that this was the one chance I had to change my careers. And I did that. That, of course, took us from Minneapolis to Holland, from a relatively sophisticated community to a small town and that was a big change. But we got along fine and we never felt alienated or anything like that, although I have to say for the most part, the more conservative people in this area have always tended to stick together and you don't go into that circle very much. But there's a difference in cultures and I think that it worked out fine.

AD: Would you like to take a break for a minute?
Sure. (Tape pauses).

Would you like to talk a little about Lynn and how she felt about leaving Minneapolis, a big city and her family, and moving to Holland and how her life was here?

That was an unusual story. We were living in Chicago and I knew the sales manager of Holland Color & Chemical, a fellow by the name of Jerry O'Shea. He's still a good friend of mine. I met him at a meeting and he said, "Jerry, in five years I plan to be general manager of Holland Color & Chemical, and if you join me as assistant sales manager, in five years you will be sales manager! So why don't you come up to Holland and look the place over." So I told that to Lynn and she said, "Okay."

Now, we were living then on Lakeshore Drive, had a lovely apartment. Lynn was working. I was working. We had enough money to live the good life. So we drove to Holland, Michigan, and then received a culture shock! They put us up in the Warm Friend Hotel and there was this small little radio in the room and the only thing that was interesting were the cars driving up and down on Saturday night. We looked at the plant and looked around town, and there was absolutely no way in the world that we were ever going to live in Holland, Michigan! And so we actually cut the visit short and went back to Chicago. Well, things happened and sure enough in five years I had the opportunity to become sales manager of the company and I was interested in that job. Lynn's home town was Minneapolis and she had friends there and family, and she was very happy right where she was. So I told her about this and how I wanted to do that, wanted to take the job and she said, "Well, you can
move to Holland, but I’m not going to." (Laughs) And so I said, "Well, look, I’d be traveling 50% of the time and I have to get a plane out of Grand Rapids. There’s no reason why we can’t live in Grand Rapids as well as in Holland." So on that basis she agreed to go along. Then I said, "We don’t know where to look for a house in Grand Rapids. Why don’t we rent something in Holland and then on weekends go over to Grand Rapids and look for a place we can buy or rent?" So that was the arrangement. But she was here no more than three months and she was thoroughly sold on Holland and became extremely active in all sorts of club work as I said before. So she was a "died in the wool" booster of Holland, Michigan, from then on.

AD: She held many positions in Holland in these clubs.

JC: Yes. She was president of almost all of them at some point in time, the Century Club, the League of Women Voters, AAUW, and whatever other groups. She was very active and was a good contributor.

AD: Now, you came here when Kevin was very young. Describe his growing up in Holland, his school experience and his education and what he generally did as a youngster growing up here. And also his participation in Dutch heritage if he did that.

JC: Well, he was two years old when he moved here. He went to Cherry Lane Nursery School and then when he was old enough went to Longfellow. We lived and 30th Street and Longfellow was on 24th, so it was an easy walk for him in the morning and at noon time. The nice part of it, Lynn has always said that he was able to come home at noon and whatever problems that he had difficulty in handling in the
morning, Lynn was able to straighten them out so he went back to school in the afternoon in good shape. Then he went on to Junior High School and then on to Holland Senior High and he was extremely active in Holland High. He was on the debating team. He was mayor of the school and he was thoroughly involved. I don’t know how popular this move was, but when he was a senior he was instrumental in having the library open on Sundays. I don’t know if the library people appreciated that, but he considers that one of his accomplishments. And also he led a drive - a march in Kollen Park - to protest the war in Vietnam. And John Donnelly, incidentally, who has died, the president of Donnelly Corporation, was one of the speakers at that march. From there he went to the University of Michigan. He majored in English and music, very active in Michigan and had a great experience there. And from there he went on to New York.

AD: And what is he doing now?
JC: Well, he’s senior vice president in charge of marketing and sales for Tufts HMO Company in Boston.

AD: And he has a family also?
JC: Yes, he married Mary Anne Hertel, and the Hertel family is well known in this area and particularly Grand Rapids, I think they are primarily a Grand Rapids family. But she went to Hope College. They met at the senior prom at high school and I think they dated for about nine years before they got married. So that was a long engagement. But she’s a lovely gal and we all love her. Kaitlan is their daughter and she’s about nine and a half now. She’s Kaitlan Counihan, which is a good name to
have around the Boston area! But the funny part of that is that Kaitlan is 25% Irish and 25% Norwegian and 50% Dutch (laughs). A great gal.

AD: Are there any other questions I may have missed or anything you’d like to expand or discuss or talk about your experiences in Holland?

JC: I can’t think of anything off hand, except to say that it was one of the great moves in my life when I moved to Holland. Not only for myself personally but for my family. We all love Holland very much and it was really great. And I can remember renting a car at the Kent County Airport and driving from Grand Rapids to Holland, and I had never done that because we came up the other way. But one time we drove from the south from Chicago and we were on M-21, I-96 of course wasn’t built then, and I just passed farm after farm after farm, and the more I passed these farms the more nervous I became. And I finally said to myself, "You know, Jerry, you’ve made a lot of dumb moves in your life, but this is probably the dumbest one." Well, that turned out to be false. I think that’s about it. I’m very fond of the Dutch people, I have a great admiration for them. They’re reliable and very solid people and I say I don’t regret coming here for a minute.

AD: Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

JC: Thank you.
Initial Contact Form

Name: Jerome E. Counihan

Date of birth: March 1, 1917  Place of birth: Brooklyn, NY

Mother’s name (include maiden name): Charlotte Foley

Father’s name: Timothy Patrick Counihan

Siblings’ names (include birthdates if known):
Cornelius - circa 1910
Ellen - [date removed], 1912
Christopher - circa 1914
Maureen - [date removed], 1922

Spouse’s name (include wife’s maiden name): Evelyn Garden Counihan

Date of marriage: August 6, 1949  Place of marriage: Minneapolis, MN

Children’s names (include dates and places of birth):
Kevin J. Counihan - [date removed], 1954

Date of death:  Place of death and burial:

Religion and church membership: Humanist, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids

Schooling and/or other training: High Point College; AMP '73 Harvard (Advanced Management Program)

Residential history (list all residences chronologically, noting the dates lived at each):
1917 Brooklyn, NY; 1918 Manhattan; 1927 Freeport, LI, NY; 1942 Bound Brook, NJ; 1949 Chicago, IL; 1955 Minneapolis, MN; 1956 Holland, MI

Occupational history (list all occupations chronologically, noting the place of work, the type of work done there, and the approximate salary):

PLEASE SEE ATTACHED

Membership in clubs and organizations (note dates of membership and offices held):

PLEASE SEE ATTACHED

Other general information:
JEROME E. COUNIHAN

EDUCATION:  
High Point College, B.S. in Chemistry, 1942.  

EXPERIENCE:  
1942 - 1945  
American Cyanamid Company, Bound Brook, NJ.  
Pigment Research and Technical Service Laboratories.

1946 - 1947  
United States Army

1947 - 1956  
American Cyanamid Company, Sales - Intermediate  
Chemicals to the pigment industry, and pigments  
to the printing ink and coatings industry.

1956 - 1967  
Chemetron Corporation, Pigments Division,  
Holland, MI.  
Sales Manager and Vice President, Sales.

1967 - 1980  
Chemetron Corporation, later BASF Corporation,  
Pigments Division, Holland,  
President of the Division. Retired 1980.

1980 - 1991  

INDUSTRIAL SERVICE:  
Industrial Sector Advisory Committee (ISAC)  
An advisory committee to study tariffs of  
benzenoid chemicals.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:  
Dry Color Manufacturers' Association (DCMA)  
Past President and Board Member.

Synthetic Organic Chemical Manufacturers'  
Association (SOCMA)

National Association of Printing Ink Manufacturers  
(NAPIM)

Chemical Manufacturers' Association (CMA)

National Paint & Coatings Association (NPCA)

SOCIAL MEMBERSHIPS:  
Holland Professional Club

Century Club, President
VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Freedom Writer

HOSPICE OF HOLLAND

Volunteer
Chairman, Long Range Planning Committee
Executive Board of Directors
Board of Directors

ROTARY CLUB OF HOLLAND

President 1990 - 1991
Chairman of the Board 1991 - 1992
Recipient of the Outstanding President Award 1990 - 1991
District 629

Initiated a Functional Literacy Program under the auspices of the Rotary Club. Volunteers tutor dysfunctional illiterates in conjunction with Holland Community Education and Good Samaritan Center.

Additional Plans to:
- Start Literacy Programs in the Workplace.
- Contact High School Dropouts to determine if they need instructional reading in order to receive a High School diploma.
- Start a Reading Program in the Day Care Centers.

SERVICE CORPS OF RETIRED EXECUTIVES (SCORE)

Consultant to small businesses and those who need advice and assistance in starting a new business.

HOPE ACADEMY OF SENIOR PROFESSIONALS (HASP)

Member and Discussion Leader on various current world and domestic problems.
Member of the Program Committee.

GREATER HOLLAND UNITED WAY

Division Leader 1991 - 1992
Member of Campaign Cabinet
Initiated First Leadership Giving Program