Padnos, Seymour Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Seymour Padnos

Conducted July 2, 1997
by Louis Di Guiseppe

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LDG: Good morning, Mr. Padnos.

SP: Good morning, Mr. di Giuseppe.

LDG: How are you today?

SP: It’s early! (Laughs)

LDG: It’s such an extensive biography I really don’t know where to start but let’s make an attempt to start at the beginning. Why don’t you tell us just a little bit about you and Holland. A little bit about your personal history.

SP: Well, as I have said frequently there are a great many things, nice things, that occur to one if you only live long enough. And I have had the good fortune to now be in my seventy-sixth year, soon approaching seventy-seven, and that qualifies for many of these accomplishments.

LDG: Where were you born?

SP: I was born in Grand Rapids only because of the fact that my mother took one look at the hospital in Holland at the time and she opted for Grand Rapids. My mother’s family at that time was living in Grand Rapids. Shortly thereafter moving to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where my grandparents subsequently lived. And my mother was a young bride, I think about eighteen or nineteen years old, and met my father who had only recently returned from service in World War I. Shortly thereafter I was conceived and born and then immediately moved to Holland where their
residence was at that time. And I have lived here all my life.

LDG: And you have four children. Tell us a little about them, what they're doing, raising them and what Holland was like at that time.

SP: We successively had a boy and a girl a boy and a girl. Our eldest son, Mitch, who graduated from Culver Military Academy in 1959 which was just exactly twenty years after I graduated from Holland High School in 1939. Mich is successfully succeeding me in my work in this firm as the sales and marketing manager. As I said, very successfully - I think I may have trained him to function at any capacity. Our second child was a daughter, Shelley. Shelley went to Holland Public Schools and then to Kingswood Academy in Detroit and then on to Michigan State University and Cooley School of Law. After having practiced in Holland for several years, she acquainted me with the fact that I had made room for boys in the business and she suggested that the girls should have the same privilege and opportunity. She has been with us, I think, about twelve or thirteen years and functions as the chief administrative officer of the firm, and again, I am very proud of the fashion in which she represents our firm.

LDG: So these are the two of the siblings who are in the firm besides yourself.

SP: Our third child is a boy, Bill, William R. Bill is a sculptor and director and manager of Oxbow which is the summer school of art in Saugatuck affiliated with the Art Institute of Chicago. Bill, while he always protested, didn't want to be entrepreneurial, wasn't anxious to be in the firm, nevertheless finds himself in a very entrepreneurial capacity because managing director of anything requires certain skills,
financial skills and otherwise management requirements. So in his own way, he’s kind of a chip off the block. He’s an entrepreneur but of his own direction of activity.

LDG: He’s got all these lovely sculptures that we see?

SP: No, the sculptures are my brother Stuart’s. Bill graduated from the school of the Art Institute and his major area of interest was sculpture and holograph art, holography. Quite accomplished at that, but chose more than to pursue his art interests to the management of an art program. Our youngest child is Cindy, Cynthia Beth. Cindy lives in Oakland, California. Up until a short while ago, she was sales manager for a very ambitious computer software firm and only recently has chosen to leave that firm and has intentions of striking out on her own, forming her own firm in the computer software industry. Cindy is a University of Michigan graduate. She majored in French and then went on to Carnegie-Mellon University where she was graduated with a Masters Degree in Business Administration. A very prestigious school and an early on woman in the graduate business school. So Esther and I are very, very proud of four contributing human beings in our point in time in this world.

LDG: When I had moved here three years ago and having been introduced to the Holland community, your name was certainly bandied about a person that was deeply involved in Holland activities as well as other areas, Grand Rapids, etcetera. Can you tell us a little bit about what it was like growing up in Holland when you were younger?

SP: Well, I’m a product of Holland Public Schools and Hope College. Graduated from Holland High School in 1939 and I was in the graduating class of 1943, which was a
short-circuited program because I had enlisted in the Army at that point in time and was called up and as a consequence was graduated with my degree but on an early schedule. I didn’t graduate with my class. They held a separate graduation ceremony for about five or six of us at the time who were off to the Army. We were at that point in time one of two Jewish families in Holland. Unfortunately, there other Jewish family who was in the scrap business and as a consequence our competitor so we weren’t necessarily on a friendly basis. So my exposure to community life was pretty much with a Gentile community which, for my parents who were both emigrants, was not awkward but I can’t say that we were fully generally accepted on a broad scale level at that particular time in Holland’s history. I’d like to say that in my own life time it has changed quite considerably and pleasurably.

LDG: Do you feel that at time you were discriminated against in any way?

SP: Well, I really don’t think that we were discriminated against. I think we were sensitive, and because we were sensitive and because my parents were particularly sensitive and because at that time almost all social activities centered around either Hope College or the church...

LDG: And you had no place to worship except in Grand Rapids.

SP: That’s exactly right. And when you think back, that was sixty-five years ago, transportation wasn’t all that easy. You didn’t just pick up and in a half hour you were in Grand Rapids. It was a major effort to go to Grand Rapids. You planned a trip to Grand Rapids. But, I have to say that in my early experiences I didn’t encounter prejudice or social difficulty only to the degree that it may have been our
own perception on that. Because when you’re sensitive, any little thing that pops up you’re inclined to distort perhaps. When I think back, I was small, I was always muscular but not a very typically qualified athlete, but I went out for football in junior high school and I did all the things...never made the varsity but I was elected president of the E. E. Fell Junior High School which you know is quite remarkable under the circumstances that I made some degree of importance to there. I was selected among the very first delegates to Wolverine Boys State which was the American Legion Program. That wasn’t anything that I worked for myself - it was a matter of selection by the instructors at the school so...

LDG: That was a very prestigious honor, I know.

SP: It was an unbelievably prestigious honor. One of my dad’s good friends, a local physician, said to my dad, "I wish my son had been selected."

LDG: My son had gone to Boys State in New York and also like yourself he became an Eagle Scout and went on.

SP: But I guess I was an achiever and have been...

LDG: Well, we can see evidence of that...

SP: I must have come by that from my parents. When I think back of what they had to start with and what they achieved in their life time, they set some guidelines for me that I think I pursued, perhaps not with specifics having declared myself, it was a matter of lifestyle. It’s an interesting situation, but back to church affiliated activities, the Boy Scouts were all church troops and my mother didn’t feel comfortable sending me to the church troop. So because of my father’s veteran status, and as a
consequence of her being an auxiliary member of the American Legion, she went to the American Legion Post in Holland and encouraged them to support a Boy Scout Troop which they did do and provided leadership. So it was in Troop 26, American Legion Post sponsored Boy Scout Troop, that I became involved in Boy Scouting. It's been a very important part of my life. And it gave me an opportunity, albeit I didn’t really know what I was really doing, to become a leader. I guess those are not calculated things. I think these are the kind of things that you fall into because of your inclination.

LDG: How did you essentially get into this business? How did it start? What was it like during that time and how has it progressed?

SP: You know what you’re leading into because an Italian immigrant family or a Jewish immigrant family in the United States kind of came from a lot of the same origins. Number one, they weren’t the popular community of Anglo-Saxon to arrive on these shores because it was Anglo-Saxon and Jews, Italians, ethnic origin peoples who didn’t necessary come from England. The Dutch had their own problems but that’s another story. Didn’t come with wealth but ambition and daring-do when you think of leaving your old world and family. You have to admire what they did. They did what they had to do to make a living. I think the mothers and fathers wanted a better life than they had previously experienced and that’s why they made this courageous move to the United States of America. But, having said that, making that living wasn’t easy either because not every employment opportunity was available to them. So they had to be creative and as a consequence many Italian immigrant families were
produce peddlers and many Jewish immigrant families, as well as Italian immigrant families, went to peddling the back alleys and picking up bones and rags. The cry of the peddler going down the alleys was, "Rags. Old iron!" you know, and they'd sing that song and they'd go to a livery and rent a horse and a wagon and they'd pick up what they could and they'd deliver it to a secondary person in that field and sell off what they had gained and provided for their families. And I have no doubt that's how my father started. He started out first having arrived in the United States working as a section hand on the railroad and he was able to accumulate a little wealth (he was a single man), a very strong immigrant kid. Then he went out West where he had been sent by the railroad and discovered that with his background from Russia that he knew all about horses and he learned that he knew how to break horses and train them to the harness. So he did that, and he bought and sold horses and then he discovered that if he had some money he could buy some goods and get on his wagon and peddle them through the countryside. All of that took a lot of ingenuity. But he didn't have ties, he didn't have family. He could just come and go as he wished at that point of time in his life. It created with him a sense of values and he learned quickly on what he could barter for. In those days people didn't have money, particularly out in where he went into Nebraska and Iowa and the Dakotas and places like that. Pretty primitive and so little on he learned how to make a living. Am I rambling too much?

SP: No! No! It's wonderful. It's so interesting. It's just that there's such a corollary between my experience as well. We had relatives who started in the rag business
who did comparably, probably not to the extent that you’re doing here, but in New York he became a builder and became very successful.

LDG: Some of the largest scrap firms in the United States were Italian immigrant families on the east coast: M. Schiavoni up in Connecticut and Schiavoni-Bonomo in the New York area and in Philadelphia, Bandivolio, in Jersey Naparato - those are all Italian names and they all started just as my dad did. They were immigrant people who came to the United States seeking a better life. In my dad’s situation he escaped from Russian to avoid serving in the Czar’s army, because in those days if a Jew was conscripted... as soon as he was bar mitzvahed he was subject to conscription. His mother had passed away and his father had remarried and there were lots of other children now in the family. He learned that the best thing for him to do would be to get out of there which he did do. As a kid thirteen or fourteen years old he was on his own. He walked across Europe and got as far as the Netherlands where he couldn’t walk any further distance, but he knew where he was heading. He stayed in the Netherlands long enough to earn passage to the United States, as a consequence of which he learned to speak the Dutch language. And so later on in his life, when his peddling career was sufficiently forthcoming to give him some wherewithall, he learned about Holland, Michigan, and came back here in 1905 and established himself here being able to speak Dutch and in that point in time Dutch was probably as viable language as was the English language and was very, very well accepted. They called my father the kleinja Hollandse yodt (?) which translates, "a little Dutch Jew" and I think they said that in a benevolent way. They weren’t being mean about it at all.
Of course he revelled in that identity. He loved to sit there and talk Dutch to these old timers. I can recall in my lifetime sitting by and listening and picking up a little Dutch myself as a consequence.

SP: Were you in the same locale you are today?

LDG: No. Dad moved... He originally...

SP: Then how did you get into the metal business?

LDG: Well, he really started out peddling and he was able to get goods from Chicago from grubstakers, people who grubstake immigrants, and they gave him packages of goods, told him how to price it and so forth and so on. But when he went out into the countryside, the farmers he was dealing with didn’t have money but they had animal skins from slaughtering, they had bones...

LDG: It was barter...

SP: It was barter, strictly barter! And as a consequence he came back with either goods or with some exchange, and scrap iron and metals were a part of that barter. Then in about 1912 or 13 he learned that he had a brother out in California who had suffered some financial reverses and who had a family, and he invited them to come here to Holland. So the two of them devised the business idea that my Uncle Harry Padnos would be the inside man because he was a family man, and my father would be the outside man, so between the two of them Uncle Harry manned the store. They now had a fixed location in Holland and my dad would go out and sell merchandise so he split off more or less from that. Unfortunately, Uncle Harry was no more financially viable in Holland, Michigan, than he had been in California. My father ended up
having guaranteed all the accounts, had to make good on Uncle Harry's inability to be a businessman, I guess. And the consequence was that Uncle Harry subsequently left the area and my father more then concentrated on what he had been doing which was the "outside man", the iron and steel and metals and rags and paper and so forth.

LDG: Aside from having a very wonderful business here, are there any aspects of Holland that have changed appreciably since you first came? Would you care to discuss those?

SP: The changes are dramatic (laughs) and phenomenal.

LDG: Have they affected you pejoratively or...? Or positively? Are you in tune with the changes?

SP: When my father came to Holland, and I have to think in terms of financial involvement, Holland was a woodworking community - manufacturers of wooden furniture and processing of animal skins and manufacturing of leather. There were a few ancillary firms to the furniture manufacturing business, for instance, there was Donnelly Mirrors, which at that point in time was Donnelly-Kelly, a predecessor company. I think it Consella Glass Company which Mr. Donnelly came here to manage. They were supplying mirrors to the manufacturers of bedroom furniture for dressers and that sort of thing. But basically Holland was not a metal working community so the consequences were that the only opportunities to deal with metals here were creameries or dairies or obsolescence scrap that might develop from the tanneries and so forth. So my father expanded his activities outside of Holland, recognizing that a dairy made a certain amount of scrap and a tannery made...
went looking for dairies and tanneries and so forth to supplement that which he was doing in Holland and improve his wherewithall. And that expanded his perimeters considerably. So the next thing he knew he was doing business in Grand Haven and Muskegon - even to the point where he went up to the Soo where the Soo Electric Company had huge power dams and bought copper and electric generators from those people and scrap. But one has to recall that he didn’t marry until 1919, so from 1905 to 1919 he was a free rolling individual. Getting back to Holland, Holland began to evolve from a furniture manufacturing community to, in some cases, metal working. And to the degree that there was metal working, it created scrap from manufacture. But my father was enterprising. He was interested in whatever anyone couldn’t find a home for that was reasonably priced and within his means he would buy that and salvage or recycle, which is a new word to the industry of a more recent date. But these were leftovers for which there was a secondary market. He discovered early on that there were paper mills, for instance, in Otsego and Plainwell and that these people were developing to the point where they were taking old wastepaper and reusing it in the manufacture of new paper, so that opened a whole new vista for him. So in Muskegon, Holland, and Grand Haven he discovered there were people generating printing operations who had waste from those operations for which he could find a home and convert it to dollars. All of these kind of things together - old rags, for instance, were sorted and washed and sold for wiping cloths or sold for in some cases paper mills used cotton rags to make paper fibers, and there were just all kinds of opportunities out there if one was willing to bend the back and make the
effort. And that's what these immigrants were willing to do. On one occasion, I recall having gone to a zoning appeal meeting here in Holland with my father, and I have to tell you this also, we were always on the dirty end of the stick so to speak. Holland was a progressive community and wanted to beautify the community and a scrap yard was always at the bottom of the barrel. So any time my father ever wanted to do anything creative in his way of thinking there were automatic obstacles. They didn't want a scrap yard here. It had to conform to certain requirements.

LDG: Not in my own back yard - that routine.

SP: Exactly. One day we went to a zoning appeal board meeting and there was a very prominent manufacturer on the zoning appeal. Quite aside from any of the discussion relevant to the subject, this gentleman said to my father, "Louie, how do you account for the fact that all of your people are in the junk business?" My father sat, and I was stunned. I knew what he was saying and, you know, and we Protestant Dutch origin people are so orderly and so forth. This was kind of beneath our dignity, you know. And my father, after giving a little bit of thought, responded and said, "George, did it ever occur to you that the kind of work I do is a little too hard and not cleanly enough for your kind of people?" And I was very proud of my father because I thought that was a very well thought out response and probably not any more kind than the question that was asked. (Laughs)

LDG: You've discussed some of what people might consider controversy in Holland. Perhaps there was always that distance because you were such a small minority. And to be perfectly frank, I've been involved in that kind of situation many, many times
so I can really empathize with you.

SP: Getting back to the point of any discrimination - I never experienced discrimination in Holland to my knowledge. It wasn't until I went into the service that I learned that people thought of people differently. And I think one of the reasons, and you just made the point, was that we were such a small minority. We weren't consequential. We weren't threatening anybody and so we were less ominous.

LDG: What do you make of the increasing diversification, for example, in the Holland community? We see so many different ethnic groups coming in. How do you feel about that?

SP: How could I be against anything like that? The fact that I have that capacity to be sensitive to that situation I think makes me a little bit more liberally oriented. I've said this any number of times to my friends in the native local community if you can describe it as that, not American Indians, but the Dutch settled Holland so they have to be described as the "native local group." They don't have that sensitivity because they never had to face that degree of insecurity. I can understand how our minority Vietnamese community or minority black community, or for that matter, other national origin people coming into the community of Holland, and Holland is kind of a closed community and always had been. If you have any degree of sensitivity at all...and I go back to another example. I was at Rotary one day many years ago when one of our more prominent local people asked our speaker, who happened to be an outstanding black athlete at Hope College, why his people always had a chip on their shoulder. The young man responded that he never had perceived that he had a
chip on his shoulder but perhaps because he wasn’t prepared to take a secondary role in life his accuser perceived a chip.

LDG: You’ve been involved in so many projects, most of which certainly show your altruism and your generous spirit…

SP: I’m an optimist, always have been an optimist.

LDG: But you’re the "not empty but full" when you speak about a glass for example.

SP: And it comes back to what I said earlier. If you live long enough, many, many nice things happen to you.

LDG: And so many wonderful things have happened to you. As I look at your bio here, I am just amazed at the things you’ve been involved with. For example, you have been director of the Michigan Historical Trust Foundation so you’re deeply involved in genealogy and where your genitors have come from. You’ve been a founding member of the Windmill Island Historical Society. You’ve certainly been very active in your church. You’re a past member of Temple Emmanuel Board in Grand Rapids.

SP: I am a member of Temple Emmanuel. Past board member…

LDG: You have so many awards heaped upon you, both honorary and otherwise that…

Well, I’m amazed!

SP: And certain things are true too, you know, if you become active in life…

LDG: You’re such a prime mover! You’ve done so many wonderful things and…

SP: (Laughs) Let’s not gild the lily!

LDG: But still you’ve had the ability to be a family person.

SP: There might be some question about that because I have to acknowledge that
originally I perceived my responsibility to my family was to provide well for them. And to the degree that meant putting in long hours, long weeks and doing a lot of traveling, which I don’t have to do any longer. To that degree, my wife raised four children.

LDG: But at that point in time we were expected to take care of our parents when they reached old age. The concept is so different today.

SP: Then one might ask about my conservatism and why am I a Republican and my inclinations are...

LDG: Why don’t you talk about that a little bit.

SP: Well, I think that we have in our attempt as a nation to provide for all peoples under all circumstances that we created a community with great expectations. But the expectations are not to be derived from their own hard work and effort, but Uncle Sam will provide. So I am guilty if that is a guilt of being...of having great expectations from people providing for themselves. In my lifetime families provided for themselves. If there were older people in the family they didn’t pack them off and send them to some old peoples’ home. They lived with one of the children. My grandfather, the gentleman from Cheyenne who lost his wife early on and his children all moved away because there wasn’t a flourishing Jewish community in Cheyenne, the daughters all married away, my grandfather lived until he was 93 or 4 in my aunt’s home in Kansas City. There was never a thought that he would be packed off to some old peoples’ home someplace. I know that the daughters, not there was charity necessary, but the daughters all kicked in and made sure that his life was
comfortable. So I come from that kind of a background. Also a depression child if you will, born in 1920 and cognizant in the 1930s and knew what my father went through to provide a living for his family. In that point in time, the closest thing that one had to charity was the WPA and some of those sorts of government programs and that was the heart of a severe depression.


SP: From my father's perspective, they were as harmful as they were good, but as my father all of a sudden discovered that he hadn't paid minimum wages. He didn't know he fell under the rules of the National Labor Relations Act which said that you will employ people and they will work maximum hours and you will pay a minimum salary and so forth. All of a sudden he fell afoul of that law because (I don't want to defend him for ignorance because I know its no excuse for violation of the law) but he just didn't know. As a consequence, he went on employing people for several years, thought he was doing a good job in the thirties keeping somebody employed only to discover that he was in violation of the law. He was fined and had to make restitution and it was a horrendous experience! And another situation happened. All of a sudden income taxes became something of importance to him in the late thirties, and he discovered that what he had thought was the right thing to do...He never drew a salary! In all the years that I was a kid he never drew a salary. But he and mother always lived out of the business. He never thought that was income. That was just living. And all of sudden he discovered in was in violation of the federal income tax
laws and he was nailed again. It came in the point of time when I was 16 or 17 years old recognizing that my father really didn’t understand what it was all about. My mother was a housewife, better educated than my father, but not necessarily aware of the legal responsibilities. When I was 16 years old, I represented the firm in Detroit in a wages and hours hearing, and I was just beat into the ground because I was intimidated, I was scared to death. I was told that the family was going to be wiped out, that somebody was going to go to prison. It was a terrible learning experience and probably embittered me to some of the...it formed my life, causing me to gauge things in a different sense of perspective perhaps of people who were recipients of the largess of government. I subsequently had to go to Detroit again but this time on the issue of income taxes. I was a little more sophisticated by that time. I knew how to defend myself and I knew how to engage intelligent and proper counsel, and in that case we were nicked but not destroyed (laughs). But those were bitter experiences and they caused me to change my life and shape my judgement of government. As a consequence, I like to think of myself as a Jeffersonian. I believe in less big government and more government decentralized into the hands of the communities and the states rather than the federal sphere.

LDG: Since you’ve been so involved in as an entrepreneur here in Holland and in industry, I have just a few questions about that. What do you make of the industry here in Holland? And subsequently, what effect does it have on the community and where would you speculate Holland would be without it and what about Holland has helped industry?
I think that the entrepreneurial self discipline and conservatism of our Dutch heritage community has served this community exceedingly well, to the point that we stand out in all of Michigan as a shining star. We are a model. When you think of who these people are - the De Prees from Herman Miller, the Haworths, and it doesn't have to be a native Dutch, but a person who grew up in this community of thinking. The Steelcases in Grand Rapids - these are entrepreneurs who worked hard and were families and chose not to be national corporations and reinvested their own wealth in these communities, as well as their charity, and that's what's made this community. And the fact that they draw upon an ethical work force who are accustomed to hard work and a fair day's labor for a fair return, a fair reward, that's what built this community and it will continue to build this community, and to the degree that we don't become owned by outside interests is of great advantage. I don't what to leave anybody out. There is countless numbers of good examples - Holland Transplanter, or instance, Holland Celery Planter, those are people who were muck farmers who had a bright idea. They were mechanically inclined and they put some things together and made machinery that the world looked around and said, "Gee, that's quite a tool that you've got there. We'd like to have one - we'll pay for it." That's what brought industry to our community.

Have they been able to change and adapt...Donnelly, for example, and Gentex where they do these polychromatic mirrors and go from a plain mirror to a very exotic and sophisticated type of mirror?

They've employed the latest types of technology and the intelligence that's available
to them in the way of education. My father never had the benefit of an education so he did the best he could with his hands.

LDG: My father too. He was a stone mason. My mother owned pasta factories in Italy, came here a immigrants...

SP: Gave up a great deal to leave Europe and come here and pioneer.

LDG: I was the only one in the entire family that had ever gone to college. We had those early struggles. Grew up in a Jewish-Italian neighborhood. I was the shabaz goy.

SP: There you go (laughs).

LDG: We had many wonderful times. Well, this has been a most interesting (tape and interview end).