1-12-1998

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http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland/96

Oral History Interview with
Howard Poll

Conducted January 12, 1998
by Ellie Norden

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
EN: Could you tell us your full name and date of birth?

HP: My name is Howard Benjamin Poll. I was named after my father Benjamin, and I kind of thought maybe Howard may be the initials of Uncle Henry, my dad's twin brother I think had something to do with that Howard. It's immaterial, but my name is Howard Benjamin Poll. I am the first son of a family of seven. I had five sisters, one younger brother, and he died when he was five years old. So I was really in a sense of the word the only son. I had two older sisters and three younger sisters. So I had also the envy record of being the only boy in the family. For many years I had to learn how to do a lot of things. Dancing with my older sisters, which I thought, that ain't no fun. Boys don't dance, girls do. Born in Holland, Michigan, in 1932, [date removed]. So I was a Halloween baby I guess you might call it.

EN: So have you always lived in Holland or have you lived other places?

HP: No, I've lived in Holland all my life. We lived in Holland on Fairbanks Avenue which is just on the town line, city limits. We lived in Holland Township. In 1940, my folks moved to 25th Street, 56 East 25th Street, which is actually one very short block from where I go to church now, First Reformed Church. Same house that later on Paul Boerigter lived. I don't know if you ever knew that or not. That was a three-story home with a green tile roof on it. At the time when I was a kid--a green tile roof, that was quite something. I lived here all of my single life and then I went
to Michigan State and went to an engineering school up there. I went one year to
Hope College, which I was happy I did. I didn't really know if I liked college or not;
I didn't know if we needed college. One thing that always kind of scared me, you
had to have a foreign language, and that year you had to have two years of some
language and I took Spanish. Didn't know if I would really enjoy it or not, but I took
it. Then I went one year to Hope, and I thought then I really wanted to go see if I
really liked college, to see if it agreed with me or not. Because I was kind of a
hands-on person and sometimes those people don't fit good with books. But I
survived, and so then I went on to Michigan State and went into engineering there.
So that's why I root for Hope College, and root for Michigan State.

EN: Good for you! Will you tell us a little bit about your family, your own children?

HP: My own family here, wife Carole Jeanne, met her while I was in Lansing going to
Michigan State. We have five children. The oldest one, my son Robert. And the
youngest son is Kenneth. Then three girls between, Karen Denise, Sherrie Renée, and
Susan Jeanine.

EN: Are they all living in Holland?

HP: No, Bob, Ken, and Susan live in Holland. My oldest daughter, Denise, lives in
Miami, Florida, works with a Norwegian cruise line. My other middle daughter lives
in Midland, Michigan, and works for the Dow Chemical Company. Some of them
leave the nest and go here and go there, and with the ease of travel nowadays, it
doesn't take too much. You can see them in just a couple of hours.

EN: That happens doesn't it? Since you were born in Holland and lived here all of your
life, what are your impressions of Holland?

HP: I don't know your impressions of Holland or what you get used to or what you feel, I think you get your more impression of what Holland is like when you go elsewhere. Then you see the difference. We look at our town and think of Holland as so-so. But yet, you take Holland as a very clean city, and yet I even look at this house and say there are certain spots I'd like to do better or think we should do better. I think that it probably part of the Dutch heritage that comes out of you. Dutch have always been noted to be clean people and that kind of stuff. I like the town; I think it's a nice sized town, however it's grown. I guess you've got to grow to maintain life nowadays. Sometimes I think it's grown too fast. We're getting some other people in town. I don't think they have the same values as what we do background. And that kind of disturbs me sometimes when they, for instance take care of the homes, or their morality, their thinking, their church attendance, something like that. I don't think it's what Holland had when we started. I think Van Raalte came here, I think he instilled a certain desire, destiny, that our people have had for years. The Reformed and Christian Reformed faith is very strong, and I think they complement each other. Now you get a lot of people coming into town who don't look at that as very important. I kind of feel bad about that. I suppose we've got to tell them, but if you say too much to them, then you're trying to tell them all. You know, you've got a problem there too. But that is the difference. I like the town, it's a nice sized town and it's grown quite a bit. I've always been around different places and tell them that I'm from Holland, Michigan, and surprisingly, a lot of people have heard of Holland.
EN: Is that so?

HP: Usually through Tulip Time. I kind of like the guy...a lot of people don't, but I still think his attitude of possibility thinking, that's Schuller. I said, "Have you ever seen Crystal Cathedral with Dr. Schuller?" "Yeah." I said, "Well, he was in Holland and went to Hope College here and Western Theological Seminary." "Oh, well that's, yeah, we know that." I like to say I think the good Lord all the way along destined Van Raalte to come here and make Hope College and Western Theological, and the missionaries and ministers from this town have gone on and have brought us Holland, Michigan.

EN: Well that's a good point.

HP: And I think that is important. A lot of people don't look at it that way, but every once in a while, Schuller will say, "I went to Hope College in Holland, Michigan," and, bingo--the whole world knows about it.

EN: That's right. As you know, Holland has been recognized as one of the ten All-American cities. Do you think that Holland really deserved this honor?

HP: Well, one of the top ten is saying an awful lot. I don't know if they deserve it, but I would think every community has some parts you don't want to talk about.

EN: Maybe rather than deserve, I should say earned. Do you think that Holland really earned this honor?

HP: I do. I think it's a nice town, and I think that people basically have all the years worked together and it made it a nice town. When the Tulip Time thing comes around, they are very kind and welcome people to their town. I think it's a good
clean town, and I think part of that, and some people may not agree with me, but I think it's part of your Dutch heritage. Because for years when I was a kid, they was 85-90% Dutch.

EN: You mentioned a few negative aspects that have come with the changes over the years. Are there any other negative aspects that you can think of? Or something that perhaps Holland still needs to work on to make it even better.

HP: Yes, that's hard to say what you can work on, you can work on them but it doesn't always solve the problem either, you know? You can say, "Well, let's do this and do that," until you get an agreement there. I don't really like the idea of these people, some of the people coming into town here and their Spanish background and they want to make their own culture, they have to have a sister city--it's kind of pushing me a little bit. Not that they can't, but here we are a Dutch town and why can't we have a Dutch town as a sister city? Because that is really what we were originally started as. I don't like some of the values these people get where in the last 10-15 years you've seen like every month or maybe every other week you've got a knifing. Is that the way you settle problems?

EN: So crime has increased?

HP: Or a shooting. I think we've got to somehow work on that aspect because I just don't like that. If I have a problem with somebody, I like to talk to them. There has got to be a better way to solve it besides violence. I would say that's probably the biggest problem I see as Holland having.

EN: Let's change the emphasis just a little bit. What are some organizations or activities
that you have been involved in?

HP: I haven't been in a whole lot of activities. Years ago when I was a kid, I thought it was a big deal to be in the Holland Junior Chamber of Commerce. I was in there a couple of years, and being I'm a hands-on guy, they had to put flag poles around downtown. You say well that sounds nice, but they had a program that every business would have a flag in front for special memorial days and so forth. Some didn't have them, so they asked me if I would go around and put flag poles in for them. Sock them in the ground. Well it was all concrete. How do you start drilling a hole in concrete? That's a lot of work. I remember when I was with Junior Chamber of Commerce, that was my job. And then I was also in the Lions Club for a few years, but they had a lot of meetings at noon and my type of work it was sometimes difficult to get away at noon or if you had a salesman there, come in unexpected, you just can't say, "I'm sorry I've got to leave," because maybe sometimes you do business with him, but you don't do that much but he only comes once or twice a year. You can't say sorry and leave. So then if you did go to the meeting you would come in a little late, and so the first thing they give you a 20 cent penalty for being late or that kind of stuff.

EN: So it didn't work out?

HP: No, I hate to do that. They say, "Oh, you're late again," or something. I think it's all done in fun, but still it irks me a little bit. I may be a too Dutch for the quarter! (laughs)

EN: Will you describe the role the church has played in your life, and why did you join
the particular church that you are a member of?

HP: You're hitting on a point there that is kind of very hard to answer. My folks joined church when they lived on the east end of town. I don't know exactly for sure when they did join. I would say they had to have joined around in the 1920s.

EN: The name of the church?

HP: First Reformed Church. That was at Ninth and Central Avenue at the time. Didn't know that much except I was a member of their family, born and raised there, baptized. We had a Rev. Wayer, I remember that when I was a kid. Kruithof and who else, was Gosellink. I knew those names when I was a kid. I think it's something that some people would say, "When did you become a Christian, or when did you really learn to be a member?" I don't know if I can really ever tell you that. Because I don't think I ever had it...

EN: Cause you grew up in a church.

HP: I grew in a church and that was the thing to do when you became 16. It was the kind of thing you should join church, and that's what I did.

EN: But does that play an important part in your life now? How important is the church to you?

HP: Well, I guess part of that is from my dad who had a strong feeling in it. He worked a lot and I think that's part of my background. I know when I was a kid, he was the head of the building committee. We had a janitor by the name of Plakke, Henry Plakke, I think the gentleman was. That was back in the...had to be about 1940, '45 or something like that. The old church on Ninth and Central. I remember dad got a
call one evening in the winter time, "Howard, come on get your coat on we're going ____________.": In those days you asked no questions, you just went along. We went to church and sure enough Plakke had called my dad the upstairs classroom had water leaking through the roof. The old church had like a castle on the front corners and there was a flat roof there, and sure enough in the winter time, you got a lot of snow, snow melted during the day time, froze up at night, and there was water on the bottom. More snow would build up, build up, build up, so you could have maybe two feet of snow on there and six inches of ice on the bottom. Those roofs those days, the caulking on the wall would go so high up, the water would get above that first thing and start leaking. I remember one time I had to go in the basement and get the old coal shovel out. We went upstairs and shoveled the carpet, would you believe this, to get the water out of the carpet. Find where the drain was in the roof, poke a hole, finally let the water drain away. So, I guess in the one sense I got a background serving the church, helping, and have done that ever since. I know my dad was in the Benevolent Society they had, and I guess it was just born in me that that's part of your life and your duty.

EN: Now don't be shy because I know that you do play an active part, and the church really depends upon you and you do give good service. Let's think about the church in general in Holland--what role does the church in Holland play? Is it an important part?

HP: I think that it is a moral fiber. I think a lot of people know it's there, and the people that go to church pretty well follow that. I think that the people that don't go to
church got a little feeling because the other people go to church. I think that it is kind of a guideline to them. I think it is good, it's got the reputation a few years ago that there's a church on every corner. It used to be some cities had a gas station on every corner, but Holland's got a church on every corner. Of course, later on some people throw it back in your face—"Boy, church on every corner, you people don't act very good," or something like that. I guess that's just the way you want to look at it.

EN: What about the church in the college? Does it have an active part in the college? Does it have much emphasis?

HP: I look at it this way, if Van Raalte came here and started this town, a place for his people and descendants to live and to grow, and I think he felt the importance of the college which I think years ago was a school. I don't know if he thought so much of it as being a college or what you would call a regular school. I think that's years ago, they kind of figured a college was like a school or high school. So that's what he wanted. I think going back to the old country, the Netherlands, you probably didn't have that much, and I don't because I of course wasn't there except just to visit there. So I think that he wanted it for the community to be good. Education for the growth future of the town. I think that is why he put it there. I think it was good for Holland. I think Hope College started out as being probably 80-90% church supported, church orientated. Now in the last few years, and I would say probably longer than I really want to admit, probably the last 25-30 years of school, Hope College is on itself because they don't get enough support, or it's grown so big that the church can't support it anymore. It's kind of like a baby grown and is an adult
now on its own. I still think Hope College is an important part of Holland, but I still think Holland is a very important part of Hope College.

EN: Could you expand upon that? That’s my next question. How is important is Hope College to our community and our community to the college? Could give me some specifics?

HP: Well, your getting into an area where I don’t know if I’m qualified to answer either.

EN: For sports, music?

HP: They’ve got a lot of activities at Hope College which I think is nice--a benefit to the town. Of course you take the town as terrific supporters of the Hope College basketball and the football too. You can’t say anything is wrong there because the two are together. They are somewhat like a marriage. I mean, Hope College of Holland, Michigan is wonderful. I think Hope College has given us a lot of very intelligent people who come here to teach, and I think it has influence on the town. I think that’s good, you need that type of people. And yet I think Holland has been very supportive of these people. Some towns they look at people with their noses up in the air all of the time. I don’t think Holland has ever been that way. I think Holland has been very cordial and welcoming. We’ve got new college professors and presidents here in the last few years. I admire those people for coming here to Holland. Usually the people that are chosen, like the president of Hope College here, you don’t know them. But after you’ve been here a while you get to know the background. Just about like the perfect match.

EN: That’s good to hear. I think that you have already indicated that your heritage is
Dutch. Is that right?

HP: Well, yes. My dad always said that he was Dutch. And I always said that I was Dutch. I kid Rich Weerstra all the time about being Dutch. I always call him the Duke. He asks where did you get that? The Duke of Orange and I really don't know except I know it's a House of Orange from the Netherlands originally. I just nicknamed him because he used to live right across from here when he first came into Holland. In the first years he and Livina lived there, I got to know them real well. Of course he was Dutch and I've always liked Dutch being in Holland during Tulip Time and all these things about stick the finger in the dike and save the land and all that. I always liked that part. My dad always said he was Dutch and my grandmother when she lived in Hamilton, she talked Dutch. When I would go over there, she hardly understood any English. And I understood very little Dutch. But my dad would go over there and they'd talk Dutch back and forth all the time. I wish that now I would have learned that. I know my grandmother used to wear her gray hair in a bonnet pulled down with like a bonnet over top, long skirt way down to her ankles. And when I would come in the room she'd clap her hands on her legs like this, "Mata, mata, mata.". Now what that means, I don't know. She would say, "Mata, mata, mata," like so glad to see you or something. I don't know. But, once in a while I would go there in the summer time. Only once or twice as a kid. You know when you are eleven or twelve years old or nine years old, I don't know how old I was. To go to grandma's house that was a big deal. I went there in the summer usually after school was out. The problem was when I didn't know Dutch and she
didn't know English, we had some problems, low and behold. I remember one time I was sitting there and it was when they had strawberries. She'd serve the food. Grandma would stand up and serve the food and very seldom would she sit down and eat until I'm all done or something like that. It seems like I don't remember the details. One time she brought some strawberries out, "Do you want the strawberries"? "Sure," I said so I ate some more, and then she said something to me, "Do you want some more strawberries?" "Yeah," so I got some more strawberries. Then she said something else, "Do you want some more strawberries?" "No, no more," but then I got some more strawberries. I didn't know what to say because I got more strawberries every time. (laughs)

EN: Oh, must have been a good time.

HP: But, my dad was born in the Netherlands. And you can talk to Russ there. When we were up there, the town of Ulson. Remember we went there with Al Boerigter?

There was a little bulge on the eastern border of the Netherlands and Germany. I read in the Holland Sentinel a few years back, that border went straight down. Then some German landlord or czar came along there and he annexed that little town in the Bentheim area. They annexed that, like a little tear-drop or so out in the Dutch. They said that was originally part of the Netherlands, but the Germans annexed it, so now it becomes part of Germany. But the people living there have always been Dutch so they still consider themselves as Dutch. So much to my surprise, when my father passed away in 1985, I got his birth certificate out and his grandparents were born in Germany. I thought that is funny, and I for several months was dumbfounded because
he always told me that we were Dutch. And I took it that way. Then when I got his birth certificate, it said born in Germany. I was somewhat disappointed. But then the one day, I don't know what made me, I looked in the Sentinel, and they had some little article. What caught my eye, I don't know, but I happened to look at that and there it was. So I said, "Okay, we're still Dutch!"

EN: The border line then. You did refer to the various ethnic groups that have come to Holland. Let's talk about that. We note that it's increasing over the years. What effect has this had on the community and how do you feel about it?

HP: I think the increase of people coming here is because it is such a nice community. Where else could you go to a nice, clean town and so forth and basically be accepted? What was your other question, what can we do?

EN: How has it affected the community, and how has it affected you?

HP: I don't really know how to say it has an affect on the community, I think that people know there are other groups here.

EN: You talked a little bit about the city not being as clean as it used to be.

HP: Well, yeah.

EN: Increase of crime. Do you...

HP: Yes, it seems to me that these people that have moved in don't know have the resources, the income and their knowledge or whatever. So they buy some of the older homes and move in there. Originally when the Dutch people moved in there, the first thing they would do was to start to clean it up, fix it up. I think these people prefer to get by without fixing it up. Maybe some of them because they don't know
or they are just renters, which I can understand. But, I still think that if you rent something you still could take good care of it. Many times you see some party take a house or a home and after a period of time the windows are broken or their front lawn has never been cut, cars parked all over the place. Sometimes necessity, because I know when I went to college at Michigan State too, they passed a law that you could not park a car in the street overnight. When I lived in one of the so-called homes, just like the people here, you've got two cars or so in one driveway, you're going to have to park on the lawn. So I can forgive a little bit like that, but when screen doors are pulled off the door, that kind of stuff, I kind of look the other way and say, "Come on people," be responsible--take care of it a little bit.

EN: Can we think of some positive aspects? Has it broadened our understanding of other cultures?

HP: I think that we are more aware of what other people do very much so. They have their different festivals and some of them have got their different religions and that is kind of hard to accept, as I have always been brought up there is one religion, but other people don't always think that way. I see the other viewpoint there. But, without trying to say I am biased or racist, because I don't think I am, but I guess to a degree I am. You can't help it. I think the town has come along, and I think that we accept other viewpoints and we tolerate some of the other people. Some of the people coming in now, the other thing that is kind of difficult is their work ethics. I had people when the employment was so low and at the factory where I work trying to get people, employ them. The older people that have been there for years though they are
very seldom late and very seldom are they absent. The newer people which I have 
hired in just the last two years think nothing of coming in ten minutes late, half an 
hour late, or not even showing up. Even today I had two people that never called, 
they think nothing of it. And if you say something to them, "You're picking on me." 
"I'm not picking on you." I've got orders from a customer that gotta get on it. I hire 
you for five days a week and why can't you be here five days a week? Their attitude 
is, "Well, I was sick." So then everything is forgiven. Well, I'm sorry, I don't work 
that easy. That's a problem.

EN: I see how that has affected you then in your work situation. Let's change our focus a 
little bit. How has the role of women changed in Holland over the last decades as far 
as work is concerned, the family, the church, and education?

HP: Well you say the last decade, which with my math is still ten years.

EN: Decades, yeah decades.

HP: If you go back more then that, when I was a kid in the '40s women's basic role was 
in the house. Taking care of the family and I think the family was stronger for that 
purpose. When I was a kid, I remember folks talking about some lady thinking about 
getting a divorce. That's unheard of. I mean that was a bad taboo, divorce. Why 
my goodness, you would never do that. Of course, ladies who were never married 
and the kids called them...

EN: Spinsters or old maids?

HP: Old maid used to be the name. But, of course, some of the kids didn't know that if 
you were too young. That was the kind of thing. I think the war brought a lot of
change on. Because you had to have some work force and the women filled that and did a tremendous job. After the war some women saw that as an opportunity to become more independent money-wise, social-wise, and they continued. I think now the trend is that a lot of these young kids see all that, by way of television, all the potential things you can have. The goods, the material goods is tremendously that they desire them. They are only going to get them if both work. When they both work, I think it detracts on the family. The family is not as strong. The kids sometime maybe have stronger ties to their parents if their parents were home, but I still think that it is not that 24-hour day mother or 24-hour dad which I think I probably had. I don't know if I'm that better of a person. I shouldn't go so far as to say that, but I feel that you would have a better family.

EN: Have you noticed any controversies in Holland as you have grown up here? Any big problems that divided the community?

HP: Years ago with the annexation, in the 1960s or there about or maybe even before, when they had the school property and all that kind of stuff coming up. They talked about the only way you could do it was equal taxation, and then they had to join the city to be equal basis and so forth. That was a big problem. I don't know what year, I would think somewhere in the late 50s or 60s. That created a problem. Then there became your townships on the outside of town, so that kind of split the two apart because you had one group, the city would do it and take care of it and then the city would give you city water and so forth and the school system. I think that kind of built a fence up right by the city limits. This is where it was and you were either in
or out. I didn't like that. As of recently, I think that you always had that city, township relationship. I am also a pilot, I don't know if you knew that or not. Not that it means that much, but I enjoy it. Years ago when I was a pilot we only had one airport here. Park Township airport, northwest of Holland here. I know we as a group of pilots would like to see that airport improved because there are a number of business planes flying out of Holland. Holland Furnace, Holland Hitch, Holland Motor, Holland Transplanter, Holland Diecasting all had planes. Years ago, we flew to a business. I could fly to Louisville, Kentucky, or Statesville, North Carolina, or some of these places where we would do business with. Actually if I had to, I could fly down in the morning and be there all day and fly back. I have done that in some occasions. It was very important. No way could you do that on a commercial airline. You would go to Grand Rapids and go Grand Rapids to Detroit, or Detroit to here or so forth. By the time you got there it was the middle of the afternoon. We saw that as a very helpful business tool. So we wanted Holland City, Holland Township, Zeeland City, Park Township to all get together and join up and make one local airport. I was on the committee to work with that, so I got a little inside information on it and hands-on experience. So we went ahead and tried to make an airport authority which was the City of Holland, Park Township, Holland Township, City of Zeeland. I think those were the four bodies involved. We wanted to make an airport here that would served everybody's needs. We needed to take the one we had and improve upon or expand upon, or a new one. And this was the idea and everybody would be taxed equal. The only way you could do that, would be "an airport port of
authority" so to speak. We worked on that with Holland Township etc. and we went back and forth. We had several meetings, and I know the gentleman who was the chairman pretty well. Whenever we had a discussion or a problem and somebody descended to say that they didn't believe it, we would stop right there and talk the thing out until we got the problem solved. Then we went on to the next step. But, the whole thing was all the way through. Everybody agreed from step one to the final step. We would recommend to all the areas to go ahead with it. Yup, that's what they did. Park Township representatives, they would go ahead and give it to their people. Zeeland said they would do it to their people. Holland Township said that they would do it to their people. And the City of Holland, the representative at the last meeting comes out and says, "I think it's all wrong." After all that work of about two years, he says I'm going to recommend to the city council to veto. To me that was a poor, poor way of working together. I thought, "Why, why, why"? We had everything, we worked through them and that was used to be at that time...He was representative but later became Mayor Smith, who went to our church for a while. I felt bad about it because here we worked on the thing and he just basically, I think later on the story was that the Holland City Manager could not be able to control the airport, and if he couldn't control it he wanted no part of it. That's only hearsay, I have no proof of it.

EN: So that is the only controversy that you can think of?

HP: But that leads up to the present one we've got right now, the area civic center.

EN: We'll talk about that a little bit later. Because now I would like to think about your
family business. I know that it has a long history and you have written stories about it. It has been in the paper. I would like you to tell about the beginning of the business, the family business, and everything you've done. Tell us all you know about it.

HP: You'll be here five minutes of five hours?

EN: That's all right, just keep talking.

HP: Like I say, I was fortunate being the only boy and being close to my father. He lived on a farm in Hamilton, Michigan. Northeast of Hamilton. I think he was one of eight children. I think that's what it was, but in those days with farming you had a big family because so many more people to help. I think his father was married a second time, his first wife passed away. I don't know what the conditions were, but he got married a second time. My father was a child of the second wife. The second wife was quite a few years younger than her husband. The father passed away when my dad was a teenager. So the older boys from the previous mother had already left her I think. But my dad and his twin brother Henry, Henry and Ben, and then they had older brother Lou. They were all by the second wife. But then being by themselves they took care of the farm, did all the work basically corn, wheat, and oats, that type of general farming. And they had some chickens of course, and a few pigs. Lou was older so he married and went south of Hamilton and bought a small muck farm because you could raise celery, cash crop. They had the golden heart celery and so forth. Kalamazoo was a big area too. They had a lot of muck around Holland and Zeeland and Byron Center, that area, Hudsonville and even up in Grand
Haven. So Lou went and bought a small, muck farm and started growing celery. It
wasn’t that far from home and quite often my dad and brothers would go and help
Lou. I think they spent quite a bit of time with Uncle Lou. And when you plant
celery by hand after awhile you may have two acres, it doesn’t sound like much, but
if they put 10,000 plants to an acre--that is a lot of planting. So they tinkered; they
liked to tinker. They monkeyed around and devised a method to plant celery. One of
the big drawbacks years ago was that if you planted celery, they plant celery maybe
three to four inches apart in the row. Because if they get wider than that, the celery
stalks would be too big. And people didn’t want a really big stalk, they wanted a
smaller stalk so they grew them close together, and the plants would hold the size that
way. Just like you do with cabbage or lettuce. You put them too far apart, the
lettuce gets too big. A lot of people don’t even realize that, but that is why the
spacing is critical. So when you get the spacing that close, you needed a machine to
be pulled with a tractor, but tractors would not go slow enough. Horses weren’t
hardly steady enough, so you wound up doing it by hand. After awhile you’re on
your hands and knees all day long and you’re getting sick and tired of that too. So
they devised a self-propelled tractor, which they designed and built themselves, and
that tractor would go real slow and they would put the plants in the machine and the
machine would put the plant in the ground. By doing it that way, the machine would
get the spacing exactly the same all the way along. That was the important part. That
proved to be a very valuable invention because it was later proved during the
Depression, in the early ’30s, that people got our machine for I don’t remember what
the price was, $50 or something they could buy a whole new machine. That was expensive. I can show you the books where a guy would come in and pay a $1.38 towards his bill. They planted with a self-propelled machine they proved that the machine could plant better than they could by hand because the machine had a self-steering device on it. Once in awhile that self-steering device would jump out of the grove and start going crosswise across the field. The people would not realize it until they looked underneath them and see a row of plants going diagonal from what they are planting. Then they would stop the machine of course, and put the machine back in line with the groove to self-steering. They would have made a loop, but the machine could not go backwards, so they put the plants in that space they missed, by hand. One of the first situations a guy says, "Okay just leave those, and you know they were going to try and put the machine back. No, just leave it and we'll plant that by hand." Two or three days later they came back and the part that they planted by hand had died. But the rest of the field was good because the machine had more uniform depth, packing, and so forth, and that was a big point. A lot of people said that they could plant them by hand just as fast as we can with the machine. But by coincidence, it was proven that the machine did a better job. And that's basically how it got started. At first they were planting celery and then they went on to plant other vegetables and tomatoes. I think what happened...in northern Indiana they raised a lot of tomatoes years ago, canning companies. Good ground there. They heard about this machine that we had here to plant celery. So they said, "Couldn't you devise a same machine to plant tomatoes?" So my dad and two brothers said, "Yes, I guess
we probably could." So they tinkered around a little bit, and they come up with this
tomato planter. That is how it progressed from small vegetables into tomato, and then
funny how that would go, just further south in Kentucky, they raise tobacco. Those
guys said, "If you can plant tomatoes, couldn't you plant tobacco too?" So sure
enough the same machine with maybe very slight modifications planted tobacco.
That's how natural it expanded from the vegetables around here in the muck ground to
tomatoes and tobacco, and that is how it went. They were doing it part-time and then
it got to be in the early to middle twenties when they were monkeying with this.
Then my dad got married and lived in Fennville, worked in the Ford garage there, a
mechanic. He was a good buddy with Mr. Bast, who is related to Reverend Bast of
Temple Time. I'm not exactly sure, I think his son Ralda, because I know the people
and they said that. My dad years ago and this Hank Bast, they made a snowmobile
years ago. They had an old Ford model-T motor. They had a couple of skis on the
front and they had an airplane propeller on the motor in the back. They had a picture
and Ellen Mast showed it to me. It had come from an old book of her dad and my
dad was sitting on that snowmobile with her dad. My dad moved to Fennville,
worked there for a few years and then moved to Holland and started working at a
garage here as a mechanic. That's when people started asking if they could build a
planter for them because they had been doing this on the weekends and nights. So
finally in 1927, my dad quit the business as a garage mechanic and started his own
business. They lived on the east end of town on Fairbanks Avenue which is the city
limit, the dividing line. We were on the other side of the tracks, so to speak. Yet we
knew the city because we were there, we were considered part of the city. Years ago they had some chickens and raised some eggs. They bartered or traded eggs for groceries. That's where they first started to build a planter. They took the chickens out of the chicken coop and started building celery planters in the chicken coop. And that's why they say what company in Holland started in the chicken coop? And that was Holland Transplanter Company. But, years ago when it first started, it was called the Holland Celery Planter because that's what they made, a celery planter. They didn't make anything other than a celery planter. So that was normal. In the middle thirties to early forties, a couple of people said, "Why do you call yourselves Holland Celery Planter Co. when you make all of these other planters too." So then they changed the name to the Holland Transplanter Company. That was early forties when they changed the name. That is how it progressed and there is a lot of stories in between here and there. That was basically it. They first had the self-propelled machine and then they had the horse drawn machine and then they went to a tractor drawn machine and then a tractor mounted and it went on in a variety of one row to, I guess we've got some models, 12 rows at a time. It is quite a change from where you first start, but you've got to creep before you walk and walk before you run. That's basically what it is.

EN: At what point did you enter the family business and how has it changed from the time since you entered?

HP: When I was a kid, the scene of the factory started right in the backyard, I was always there. As a matter of fact, I think some people wonder what is wrong with me
and that's probably what the answer was. When I was a kid about three years old, I was on my kiddie car and I was in the factory. In the winter time we had a big snowcoat on and a cover for your head, and a cap on—thick. One of the very first fellows to start working for my dad was Everett Meurer, who was working on a drill press. I was just a little kid and I would take my kiddie tricycle around through the shop. Right next to the drill press was a stairway going down to the basement. Like a trap door. They said the story was Everett was running the drill press and talking to me. Next thing you know, I wasn't there. They figured it out, I had run my kiddie car backwards, went over the edge of that trap door and right down the stairway in the basement. There was a metal support pole there, and they think I might have hit my head because they said I was basically unconscious for a short period of time. Never been the same since.

EN: A concussion, I guess.

HP: Some people say well that was the beginning of it. So I always...

(end of side one)

HP: ...a school of hard knocks, I started when I was young. I always played in the factory when I was a kid. A lot of these little things rubbed off that you don't realize when you're doing them, but you see this, so as I got 10 to 12 years old, I knew quite a bit about the company already. However, when I was six years old or five years old, I was in kindergarten, I had an unusual experience. It kind of impressed me later on more so then when it happened. My day would take these celery planters out to the farm around Byron Center in the muck field, and they would plant some celery. It
was a two row machine. We had a pick-up truck and a trailer, and we had one machine on the truck and one on the trailer, and I would go to school in kindergarten in the morning. I would go home at noon and we were only two blocks from the school there, Federal School by Hart and Cooley. Come home at noon and the truck was all ready and I went with my dad to deliver planters. You might say what would a five year old kid do helping his dad deliver planters? That’s kind of foolish you know, but I don’t know if my dad figured it out that way or if I was just a pest and wanted to go. We would go to the first farmer, take the machine off the trailer, put it in the field, get the thing lined up, and my dad would sit on one planting unit because it was a two row planter, and I, a five-year old kid, would sit on the other one. Well, how about that. The farmer would observe what we were doing. He would watch my dad, and my dad would show him what to do, and all the meantime I was planting on the other row. You look back on it and it was quite an advertisement. So, we would go maybe 25-50 feet so the farmer got the idea of how it would go, then we would stop, my dad would get off, and the farmer would get on and keep on going another 25 feet. All the time, this little five-year old kid would be planting the other row. So after we did that, we would leave the machine there because he basically bought it, we would go to the next place and do the same thing there. That was my first year in school, I was a salesman I guess. Interesting for me. But it really never impressed me until, I never thought about it until later in life. That must have been quite something when you come with a little five-year old kid and put him on the planter and the farmer looks at this, but it did the job. So I was involved quite early.
I guess all of the time I always wanted to go work there. There was always a thought
that I wanted to go into engineering school of some sort. But I wasn't sure if I really
wanted to go to college or not. So I graduated from Holland High in 1950, and I
went one year to Hope. It was right here, I knew the school, I didn't know it that
well, but I knew Hope College. Stayed at home and I went there to see if I really
liked school because some kids complain books, books, books. I thought well you
need book knowledge anyway, so I wasn't scared of it, but I wasn't really apt to it
either. But, I went one year to Hope, took a general course and thought I kind of
liked it. So then I transferred, went over to Michigan State in engineering. I was
there for three years and then I came back. I joined my father in business in 1954. It
was interesting. Different. I think that one of the persons that influenced me was a
stockbroker for my father back in 1950. I was going to go to college, but then you
had to have majors and minors and languages and all of that requirements, and I
didn't know that much and my folks had never gone to college. I think my dad,
eighth grade is probably the farthest he went and that was at that time considered
pretty far. So, I brought some of the stuff home from school, and I had my older
sisters, but neither one of them went to college either. What do you want to do? I
didn't know quite what all of the requirements were, so this stockbroker of my dad's
came over and said he would help me. He came over and one of the questions that
kind of intrigued me, what do you want to make out of your life? Or, what do you
want to do? It kind of caught me rather cold too. I thought that was kind of an
unusual question. I thought and the answer came out, "What can I do to help my
fellow man?" I wondered where that came from. It just came out, like you say it. I don't know if my subconscious mind, but that's what I did. I think that is what I am trying to do with life is make it easier for other people to eat, or raise food, or whatever. I feel that way if I can make something for someone else, make it easier or better, so be it. That's what I like to do.

EN: That's really commendable. What other machines have you made since you have joined the company?

HP: Since I have joined the company, I've made several machines. We made some fertilizer attachments, and we made a machine to lay plastic mulch. We made another machine to dig up the plastic mulch. The mulch is laid over the fields. It's a black mulch, and you see it a lot of it in Florida and around here too. They get the field ready and put the black mulch over the field and that eliminates weed growth because the sunlight doesn't go through the black mulch. We made a machine to plant through the mulch. Digs a hole, puts a plant in there, and so the plant gets the benefit of the warm temperature, it eliminates the weed competition, and it gets all of the fertilizer and moisture for itself. You get about a two week earlier harvest, about double your yield on vegetables that are raised in plastic mulch. I worked on that machine, and several others. The latest one that I got a patent on a few years back was a rotary planter. A new design, a planter that can plant about twice as fast as you can by hand. That was kind of unique because there were other machines similar to it on the market, but I still came out with a better machine than everybody else had, I think. People like our machines, figure it's better. It's got better openings on it. So I feel
good about that. Locally in town here, I built something, and this is kind of what you do here—civic minded people. You help your city along a little bit, you're a citizen so why not help the town instead of fighting it and knocking it down? Help it. Many places that I have gone people have said, "Where are you from?" I say, "Holland, Michigan." "Oh! That's where they've got tulips!" They seem to know it. A few years back, Jerry VanSlooten, who works for the city, was at the ballgame one night of the church baseball team. "Hey, I want to see you," he said. "What's the problem?" "I've got to see if you can do me a favor." I said, "Okay, what is it that you want?" "Can you make a machine to dig tulip bulbs? Right along the curb you've got these tulips around Holland, and every three years we've got to dig them up and replace them, and that is a heck of a job doing it all by hand. Could you make something like that? You could do that couldn't you?" "I guess so," I didn't really think any more of it, just kind of yeah sure you know and didn't really think serious about it. Two weeks later he calls me up and says, "How you coming?" I said, "On what?" He said, "I'm serious, the city would like that." So, he persuaded me to try it. I did some tinkering around and we successfully made a machine that goes right along the curb and digs up all the old bulbs and makes a nice, even trench for putting the new bulbs in. I was quite happy with it, it worked pretty successful. They use it now, and it makes a trench about eight inches deep and about ten inches wide. Those guys told me a while back to how many blocks they can do in an hour's time, where they used to do one or two by hand.

EN: Would the next step be something to plant the tulip bulbs?
HP: Well, I just got through doing that this past year. They were asking now, we got the
digger, how can we plant it? That's something a little bit to be desired yet, but it
does a pretty nice job. We got this glorified go-cart. It goes right alongside the curb.
Here again from the old machine, the self-steering machine, we got this self-steering
also. It guides right along the curb, so the guy doesn't have to steer it. It goes really
slow and it is a hand or a foot pedal. You could put a motor on it too if you want,
but you don't need it because you're going so slow. He's got the bulbs right there
and he just puts right in the trench, and goes right along and puts them at whatever
space he wants. Kind of unique, it's simple. Gets the guy so that he is not on his
hands and knees. Because when we brought the machine out they said that they were
glad we got the machine there because they had a guy yesterday who had to go to
hospital because he was on his knees and had a stone get under his kneecap. Hit it
just right and he was in pain he said, but you know that's how that goes too.

EN: It seems to me that you also sell some of your equipment internationally. Can you tell
a little bit about that?

HP: We've over the years sold machines quite a lot of different places. When I was a kid,
I remember back in the 1940s we sold some machines to England and Norway for
Christmas trees. They would put them in the state nurseries where they put a lot of
the small trees, raise them and get them to a bigger size. That's what we did. That
was a self-propelled machine then too. It planted seven rows in the bed of these trees.
Then more recently we have sent machines to Australia, Israel, Tunisia, Italy, England
and Oman. A year and a half ago, I went to China. This was interesting because we
got a letter from China, they didn't give a name, they just wanted to know about planting such and such. Corn and cotton. We answered back and forth enough that finally we got the name of who it was. It was the Chinese government. They want to raise more food on the land that they've got because they've got such a big population. When I found out what they were doing it intrigued me because it didn't make sense. They were wanting to transplant corn. You don't transplant corn, you seed it. Same thing with cotton. But, that is what they wanted to do. I thought something was funny, but they were talking about how many thousands of acres or hectares of crops they wanted to plant in a very short time. It was unbelievable, what potential could be there. So, I and another fellow who is acquainted in China, he lives in California, we flew over there. He has been there many times, he knew these people basically on a first-hand basis already. But we saw what they were trying to do. They are trying to raise the corn in a greenhouse. About the first of April, put it in a greenhouse, let it grow into a nice little plant. What they are doing is planting wheat in the winter time or in the fall, and harvest it about the first of June. As soon as they are done harvesting it they go to the greenhouse and get the corn plants, they are already six-eight inches tall, and then they take our planter and transplant them. That's the way they can gain about six weeks to ten weeks growing because it was started in the greenhouse. That's what they are after because they have to raise more crops. So that was very intriguing. They told me right up front that it won't be something overnight. It will be two or three years if then. They are very slow, methodical, and check, check, check, and this and that and everything else. But
they've got the money and they say their need is there.

EN: Your family is all involved in this business, and so as you look to the future, how do you think that your family will carry on the business?

HP: Well, it's sometimes a good question. I think in the past it was my dad, his twin brother, and older brother, and then it went from the older brother mainly sold out to my dad and his twin brother, and then my dad's twin brother Henry sold it to my dad, and then my two brothers-in-law and myself went into business with my dad so it was four of us for a while. Then my dad retired and it was just myself and my two brothers-in-law, and they too retired. So it is just me right now. But, I've got two sons and a daughter involved in there and working actively. My son Bob works in the office, and Ken works in the factory, and they are both well qualified and can handle it. I hope they continue. There is a need there to be met, but I can't dictate to them what they will do, but I would like to see them continue. Sometimes things change and you don't know, it is beyond your control, but I hope they will.

EN: Well thank you. To be sure you've made a wonderful contribution not only to our community, but to the whole world really. I know that you are a man of deep faith. Has your commitment to faith gotten easier or harder?

HP: I guess it's maybe a little easier because I look at certain things that I am doing and some people years ago used to think that that was kind of a foolish thing. But, I look at it now if that's what it is like you say "feed your enemy." Do unto others, and turn your cheek seventy times seventy--it's not always the big things, sometimes even the little things that you've got to do. I have talked to some of my employees and come
right out and ask them, "Did you go to church on Sunday?" They look at me kind of funny. I just had one last week and I said, "When is the last time you've been in church?" I'm not pushing that he has to go, but I like to think that it would be good for him. I said, "Are you going to work Saturday morning?" Well, he wanted to take his wife out for breakfast. I said, "I'll tell you what Dave, I'll make you a deal. You don't go out for breakfast Saturday morning, but you go out for breakfast Sunday morning and then you take your wife to church, and when you go to church you get the minister to sign your bulletin that they've been here and I'll buy your breakfast."

EN: That's a good one! Okay, we are going to touch a few other subjects. Would you like to give an assessment of the city government?

HP: I think the city government of Holland has been pretty good. You hear a lot of these different governments all over and I've not really gotten involved in, but I think that they have done a real good job. I think occasionally you get some people that like to get the power to kind of use it for personal prestige which I don't like, but I guess that's something that grows on you. Temptation, you want to do that. Like a powerful person. Oh boy look what's what. The only thing I see of city government is that they have done a nice job. I've had a couple of occasions that I wonder, but we all make mistakes, so you can't say that. I remember years ago, the city of Holland and the Holland township, Park township were going to try and make an airport for the local area here. What the thing was at that time was they wanted to get one and have a local community port of authority. And the city of Holland and the other ones all debated. I was on the committee for two years and worked on it.
Finally the city of Zeeland, Holland township, or Park township, and I said, "Okay good, let's go ahead with it." At the very last meeting this representative from the city of Holland said no, he didn't think it was right. He was going to recommend that the city turn it down. I felt really disappointed because it was two years we had studied this thing and tried to get all these things and everybody agreed on it, and then the very last minute he shoots it down. He said the manager of the city of Holland would not have it under his control. I felt really bad because I didn't think that was a requirement of it, but he seemed to think that it was. That time gave me a little different viewpoint of the city government. They try to be the big brother and tell everybody around what they have to do. The parallel of this is that they just opened this area center here a while back.

EN Oh you'd like to talk about that. That's a good subject.

HP Well, I'm involved in two different ways. They first came up when the city said they needed a new civic center, and I agree with them because the old one is pretty old. They are going to have it down on the east end of town, the Western Foundry. I do business with those people. They are probably going to have to move and so forth. But then they come up with about 60 houses that are going to have to be torn down, and I kind of felt sorry for them because that wasn't too far from where I was born and raised. Just south of me. So I knew some of the houses there. But to these people that was home, and they had to tear those houses down and get those people out for the civic center when they had other places? The other one was the General Electric plant on 16th Street. There was a lot of room available, it was closed down.
The city could go in and get it, but they never approached the GE people. The people had a lot of comment about it, so the committee which was made of the city of the Holland, and Park township all around took a second vote and recommended the GE property over the Foundry. That surprised me. I had one party approach me and said would we be interested in selling Holland Transplanter because we were right next door to GE. They would like that additional space for parking. I said I had no problem with that, I don't want to stand in the way of the city if they want it, I'm sure we could work something out and so forth. They made a couple of comments in the paper and said that GE property you really can't buy it because it is contaminated. One person went as far to say that Holland Transplanter was the source of the contamination. I felt bad about that because that's not the case. What am I going to do? Call the paper, tell them off? That doesn't solve anything. The people from the EPA came over afterwards. They came over and looked at our factory. The head lady and her assistant went through the whole plant. She said, "I don't see any source of contamination." It made me feel good. But still it was in the paper that somebody in the city government thought that we were, or had conveyed it, that we were the source. That kind of made me mad. Now, then they turn right around and the city of Holland said now after they talked about it and studied it, had their own committee work on it, and now all of a sudden that's not good. Now they want a new one downtown. They had this committee work two years on it and here again they say now they don't want it. If you tell somebody to do a job and they come back and report two years later, and then all the sudden you say no hey this is no good, but that
brings memories of the airport committee I was on years ago. Is the city government trying to be a big brother? They know everything that's good, I'm not saying the site they have isn't good, but the method they did it I think rubs people the wrong way a little bit.

EN: What do you think then about building up Windmill Island and the plans that the city government has for that?

HP: I think Windmill Island...I was privileged to go there, the Netherlands, with the mayor a year and a half ago. I felt quite good about that because we were from the First church of Dr. Van Raalte, and we had several of us there. Nice, good-looking guys, a whole bunch of us. We had a lot of fun. But to trace the steps of where he was over there, come over here, it was interesting. I would say that Windmill Island would be sort of a beacon in the midwest United States of what Dutch heritage is. It could show a little bit of the Netherlands right here. Some people may see it as tourists, and it may be basically that's what it is. But I think because we are founded by the Dutch and we have a lot of Dutch people here, and Dutch customs, I would like to see it go forward.

EN: Even to the point of building homes, residences?

HP: Well, the residences I think on there would make it more realistic. I don't know if you have to, but in the Netherlands that's how a lot of the towns are. The people live right in the small homes. I don't know if you have to go that far, but if they want to, I have no objections to that. I think it would be a nice, quaint, little town and I think that it would help keep Holland on the map so to speak as to know who we are, and I
think that's important really.

EN: We've covered a lot during this time together and I thank you for your contribution.
Before we complete this, is there anything, one more thing that you would like to say? Something we have not touched upon or are you satisfied with what we have done?

HP: I guess everything I've done so far is an element of live. I had good support my wife and family, and that means a whole lot. She's been very good in town here and I know she came from the city of Lansing, and to come to a little, Dutch town she kind of thought, "Oh my gosh, what am I getting into?" But she has survived and she has done very well. She is very active in our church, and I am quite proud of her. My family as a whole, I think you can have some good sheep and some black sheep, but I think that I have had all good sheep. And so I am really happy, and if I'm the shepherd of them, I don't know, I hope that I am a good shepherd.

EN: Good, and thank you very much.