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Ponstein, Lambert Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Lambert Ponstein

Conducted November 7, 1997
by Louis di Giuseppe

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LDG: How are you, Dr. Ponstein?

LP: I'm fine. I had a little heart trouble, but I'm getting along very well.

LDG: Where were you born?

LP: The Netherlands; of course, I was only nine months old when I came to this country with my parents.

LDG: Did you just come with your parents? Was there anyone else involved? Do you remember what Holland was like when you were there?

LP: No, I came to Grand Haven, not to Holland.

LDG: And you lived there for thirty-five years, is that correct?

LP: Yes. That's right.

LDG: What was Grand Haven like then?

LP: Grand Haven, when I was a kid, there were around 7,500 people. It was a small town. For the size of the town, there was quite a bit of industry. We had a lot of Dutch people in Grand Haven. My father was a commercial fisherman in the Netherlands in the Zuider Zee.

LDG: The famous Zuider Zee, where the guy had the dam and pulled his finger out? Was that it?

LP: No, not that one. Of course, that's all been dry now. In fact, there used to be a great deal of commercial fishing in Grand Haven. A number of tugs fishing in the
area. Of course, we always had a lot of resort business in Grand Haven. For awhile, I sold fish too in Michigan here. As far as fish are concerned, I’ve smoked thousands of pounds of fish: chubs, trout, whitefish, and so on.

LDG: I guess there were a lot more fish then than there are today. And probably a lot less species.

LP: Most of the fishing then was trout, whitefish, herring, and chubs. Practically all the people at that time in Grand Haven that were fishing were also of Dutch descent. They either did this when they were in the Netherlands or their parents were fisherman. Grand Haven was much more of a tourist town than Holland. And I think it still is. As far as cottages are concerned, people live there every summer. They always had a lot of summer residents—a lot of people from St. Louis used to have cottages in that area.

LDG: And Chicago too?

LP: Yes, but St. Louis more than Chicago, even.

LDG: That’s quite a distance. By car, it’s a six hour trip. I know, of course, I have a son in St. Louis. How would they come up, by train?

LP: Yes.

LDG: Or would they take a boat—when they had those sailing vessels?

LP: Later on, of course, they had cars and so on. Many of those people used to come with the chauffeurs and with their maids.

LDG: So they were wealthy?

LP: Oh yeah, these were people who were in good circumstances. In fact, I remember
selling fish along the beaches that it was just cottagers and so on. I got to know many of those people.

LDG: Why don’t you tell me a little bit about your family, about your wife, and about your children? Where did you meet her, where were you married?

LP: I met my wife over here in Holland. I used to see her when she was going to work downtown.

LDG: That’s Joan.

LP: Joanne. Her father was a builder in town and lived only two blocks from Hope College. We have three daughters, all whom graduated from Hope College. I’ve had two brothers who graduated from Hope College.

LDG: What are the girls doing today? Do they have families?

LP: Yes, the oldest daughter lives in Illinois. The middle one lives in town here on Lake Macatawa.

LDG: So you see her often, I bet?

LP: Oh yes, the youngest one lives in a suburb of Milwaukee. After she graduated from Hope College, she went on for a Master’s degree at Northwestern University in business. For a number of years she was with the Chevron Corporation.

LDG: Do these girls, your daughters, have children?

LP: Yes, the youngest one has two boys. The oldest one has one son and one daughter. Sue, who lives in town here, has two daughters and one son.

LDG: So two daughters have chosen to leave Holland and Grand Haven and one daughter chose to stay. I didn’t count all your grandchildren; how many are there?
LP: Seven.

LDG: So most of the time you spent in Grand Haven, but you also spent fifty years in Holland.

LP: Yes.

LDG: What was Holland like when you first moved here?

LP: Well, Holland has grown tremendously.

LDG: I've seen that in even the three years that I have been here.

LP: Yes, in these years. I used to get to Holland quite often when I was selling fish too. After all, it was only twenty miles away. I remember when Tulip Time was at its beginning. Most people would come from Grand Haven.

LDG: When they would scrub the streets with BonAmi? They raised all that fuss, and they never used it again.

LP: Yes.

LDG: Dutch cleanser.

LP: Holland had grown very rapidly, as you probably know in the last couple of years. It has grown industrially very rapidly in the last years. At one time, Holland was far more Dutch than it is today.

LDG: You know that, from the reading that I have done and they people I have spoken to, Holland is only 30% Dutch today.

LP: Oh yeah, that's true, I have no doubt about it. But at one time...

LDG: You've got a lot of foreigners, like me, who have moved in from New York City.

LP: I can read and write Dutch too.
You can?

Yes, I read Dutch as well as English.

That's wonderful. How did you get into the department of religion, for example? You were a professor at Hope College. Here you were selling fish, you say, and then you got into the field of academia where you became a college professor.

Where did that come about?

It was the war years, and I spent four years in the Army overseas in England...

You were a World War II veteran?

Yes.

Where were some of the places that you were at?

I spent most of my overseas work over in England. I was with a hospital unit over there.

This was before you had gone to college?

Oh yes.

You were probably about 18 at that time?

No, I was older than that. I was in my twenties. After I got back from the Army, I decided to go to college. I had a brother who was in the Army also, so we both decided to go to Hope College. This was normal; my other brother had been at Hope also.

This is after the war?

Yes, he went to Hope College and then he went to law school. Later on, he was a district judge in Grand Haven. So, I went to Hope College.
LDG: What year were you there?

LP: 1945-1948. I finished college in three years.

LDG: So did I. I was in from '45 to '48.

LP: Yep, same time. Then after I finished college, I taught high school in Newaygo for a year then I decided to go to seminary. During the three years that I was at seminary, all three years, I also taught courses in speech at Hope College.

LDG: I see that, you were in there for three years.

LP: Plus, I used to coach debate while I was at seminary. So I had a busy time at that time. Then when I finished seminary, Dr. Lubbers who was then president of Hope College, hired me to teach in the department of religion. That is how I happened to get in there and stayed there for a good many years.

LDG: What was Hope College like then? Very small, I guess.

LP: Well yes, but at that time...take for example when my brother went to college there were 450 people. That was a long time before. When I was there, it was very rapid growth with all the GIs coming back.

LDG: You had a whole contention, I think, ROTC there.

LP: It just jumped to 1,200 students. In fact, Dr. Lubbers had to go looking around for faculty. It was an interesting thing during those years when all the students were there, he managed to pick up quite a few faculty—even people from around here. The interesting thing about it is that the faculty also made a name for themselves as being a very capable group of men and women. The records indicate that also.

Later on, when Hope was chosen as one of the ten best small colleges in the
country, it was that group of fellows. Part of it was they were dedicated to the school. They weren’t afraid of work. Most of those fellows and women were teaching large classes. The college from that day on grew and has continued to grow.

LDG: Now that you have been in HASP since its inception, as you look around you probably see a lot of persons who were probably your colleagues at that time. One of whom is probably Dr. John Hollenbach and others. Who are some other people who are in HASP that you knew then?

LP: Dr. Henry ten Hoor…there are a number of people in there who were teaching at Hope. Jantina Holleman in the music department. If I had the list here, I’m sure I would be able to pick out at least a dozen or more of those people. Roger Rietberg, a musician.

LDG: Was Renz Hoeksema there then?

LP: Yes, Renz was there. I knew Renz when he was in college, in fact we were there together at college after the war. I remember Renz at that time collecting clothes and so on for overseas. A lot of people who had been overseas were taking part in that. We went through the whole town, with plenty of help, picking up clothes that were sent in to Hungary. Renz had been in the Army also. In fact, the number of people who had been in the Army that were in there right after the war was amazing. GIs, many of them still wearing their GI clothes that they took along with them; but they were a good group. At that time, we still had fraternities and sororities. The fraternities didn’t do very well. GIs didn’t have time to be fussing
around with that. Sororities were okay—they were women. As far as a fraternity was concerned, I was never in one. My brother, either. We weren't going to be bothered with that then. We lost four years, and we wanted to get on with a job.

The college had grown considerably, not only in the number of students, but there have been different departments that grown rapidly and new departments. For example, we didn't have a department of geology. We didn't have a dance department. Chemistry has grown tremendously. We had an art department, but it has grown very much.

LDG: Was the Theological Seminary there then?

LP: Oh yes, that has been there for years—many years. Right across the street.

LDG: Was that established by Albertus Van Raalte?

LP: No, I don't think so. I wouldn't say for sure, but that has been there many years.

LDG: I was just speaking to a gentleman at lunch who has been there for thirty-five years. His first name Don, I don't know his last name.

LP: At the Seminary?

LDG: At the Seminary, teaching there. I asked him if he knew you, and he said, "Yes."

LP: Don, I'm trying to think of who that might be.

LDG: Balding, about my height, he swims everyday at the Dow. So the Theological Seminary has been there as long as Hope College, you say?

LP: No, I think that Hope College has been there somewhat longer, but it's a good many years that the seminary has been there.

LDG: Dr. Ponstein, are you involved with the church?
LP: Yes.

LDG: Which church?

LP: I'm a member of Maplewood Church.

LDG: What is your impression of the church?

LP: By the way, I noticed you said the Reverend Ponstein, that's because I was ordained, but I've never been the pastor of a church.

LDG: That's interesting.

LP: I've always taught. I have a doctorate. When I finished seminary, I was already teaching at Hope College, and I stayed on there until I retired.

LDG: That's a long way from selling fish, Dr. Ponstein.

LP: Well, not necessarily.

LDG: Well, I guess casting bread upon the waters.

LP: You see chaps like Peter, James, and John were all in the same business. They were all fisherman over there on the sea of Galilee.

LDG: You are perfectly right.

LP: My grandfather in the Netherlands was a minister, but he had also been in the fish business at one time.

LDG: A noble profession. How has the church changed in the past fifty years?

LP: Well, of course it changed in the fact that we have many more people who have moved into Holland and have become acquainted with the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church. We've had more churches of different denominations that we never had before that have come into Holland and are doing very well, as
far as that’s concerned. The church has grown, but part of that is because of the population. There was a time when we didn’t have a Presbyterian Church. There was a time when we didn’t have the big church on the south end of town. At one time it was a very small church and now it is one of the largest in town. A lot of that has happened as far as churches are concerned.

LDG: You mean the one near the nature center--that big one on Graafschap Road?

LP: No, that one always was a Reformed church. But that’s a comparatively new church, as far as Reformed Churches are concerned. A new congregation. I’m thinking the Wesleyan Church, right near Christian High, right in there on the south side of town. That used to be a very small church, now, of course, it is probably the largest church in town. The interesting thing is that a great many people in Holland who have Dutch backgrounds are now members for that church also, same thing.

LDG: Was there every any antagonism or animosity from sect to the other?

LP: No, I wouldn’t say so.

LDG: My understanding was that people have told me that at one time people would walk down the opposite side of the street whether they were Christian Reformed or RCA. Did that ever happen?

LP: I’d rather think that’s a myth. Never while I was here. In fact, most of those people had friends and relatives in these churches; that’s not unusual. I’m thinking of people I know and are close friends. People that go out together, inter-marry and so on, and they are from two different denominations.
LDG: Wasn't life a little more austere at that time? Weren't things quite different?  
Didn't people attend church a lot more often than they do today?

LP: When you go back a long ways.

LDG: Weren't there certain restrictions? When stores were closed on Sunday? Why don't you tell us something about those?

LP: Stores were closed generally on Sunday. That's not very long ago that stores opened, and there are still many of them that don't open on Sunday.

LDG: I think D&W is one of them.

LP: There was a time when practically all stores, certainly downtown, grocery stores, were closed too. Take for example, we have a Christian school system that we have in Holland which has grown rapidly. The rather interesting thing is that the largest number of students in Christian high now do not come from Christian Reformed Church but from Reformed Churches. Rather interesting switch. The people work together much better; there's not doubt about that. You take working with Good Samaritan Center. All churches pretty well cooperate in that. As a result of the Good Samaritan Center, we've had at least one other organization in town working with people in need. This one happens to be Christian Reformed, where they have homes for people who are mentally retarded or who have mental difficulties or rather slow learners. We have homes for those. They were first ones, also, to have a home for women who have domestic problems. Before, the community did it. There was nothing unusual about that. It's rather interesting, that some of the churches were interested in social problems before the nation at
large became interested in it. It’s not unusual.

LDG: So what you’re saying, under the spirit of ecumenism, there was more commingling and joining of forces than there was dissention among the churches.

LP: Yes, they worked together.

LDG: You almost have had completely different sects. The only thing you haven’t had is a temple or a synagogue, but you have had Catholic churches here.

LP: Yes, and the Jewish people we have here have always been very well honored citizens in our town.

LDG: Padnos, for one.

LP: Sure. Just two or three weeks ago, I was with Seymour Padnos and a couple of other fellows went over to Muskegon to a synagogue to hear a discussion on Jews and Gentiles getting together, how could they work together and that type of thing.

LDG: That’s wonderful; I had the opportunity to also interview Seymour, about two months ago.

LP: Sure, Seymour went to Hope.

LDG: They’ve been very much involved in the community. They are very philanthropic. They have done a lot of good work.

LP: I remember his father and his mother too. His father, when he left Russia, was under a lot of persecution over there. He went across Europe and finally landed in the Netherlands. So he could speak Dutch too, by the way, the old gent. He lived in the Netherlands for awhile. Later on, he heard there was a place in America where you could talk Dutch also, named Holland, so he came over here and started
in the junk business.

LDG: What's interesting to me is that you came here when you were nine months old.

LP: Yes, to this country.

LDG: How did you learn Dutch to read, write it and speak it?

LP: My father taught me. Not only that, in the Netherlands there are a lot of dialect. Probably a better way to describe it, is that a town would take on pronunciation of words that are peculiar to their own.

LDG: They had their own argots.

LP: When I was taught Dutch, I had to learn school Dutch—that which was taught in the schools. In other words, I was not to learn anything about a particular dialect. That would be out of the question. The fact of the matter is, this is some years ago, after the war, a lot of Dutchmen came to Canada. They immigrated from the Netherlands to Canada over in the Ontario area.

LDG: How interesting. Tell us some more about that.

LP: Joanne and I (I was in Seminary at the time), we spent a summer in Canada—in Ontario. We would meet these Dutch people as they came in, we would help find them places to live. We helped them with the language. On top of that, there was a little church that they had where the Dutch people went to church. I used preach on Sunday for those people who were immigrants and did not know English. I did that in the Dutch language, speaking Dutch as well as they were speaking it. This was a very interesting experience working with them. Many of those people who came after the war, many of them were farmers, but they have done very well. The
kind of people who are hard working, willing to put up with everything to get ahead, and so on. We had a great time there that summer. We worked hard. We travelled all over looking for farms and looking for farmers who would hire them. I translated for them. Here's your Dutch man and here's your Canadian. They would be talking and the say, "I will pay him so much if he works here," and then I would tell the Dutch man, "He said so much." Then he would say to me in Dutch, "That's okay." But I didn't answer that, I just kind of looked at the Canadian and gave him a grin that said that the fellow wasn't much interested in that. Then he would up it. So I was really doing the bartering. I hadn't been in the fish business for nothing.

LDG: You knew how to bargain and negotiate.

LP: Oh, yes.

LDG: There's a Jewish word for that, it's called "hundel and tommel."

LP: Yes, that right. The word "hundel" is very similar in Dutch.

LDG: I've even learned a few words in Dutch. "Hoya da hoista me." My friends, Janet and Al Hietbrink. But they haven't learned any Italian, see that's were I'm from.

LP: Oh yes, well my youngest daughter is married to an Italian.

LDG: It's interesting that you say Et-alian. When I mention that out here, everyone says I-talian and I have to correct them. (laughs) How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays into the community today?

LP: The Dutch people are very proud of the community. Take for example, the 150th anniversary. These people look back and they realize that with the very humble
beginning with Van Raalte that this has grown. Even after 150 years, much of the
original hopes and so on, are still with us. The Dutch attitude, as you mentioned,
of getting ahead and being interested in their own homes and yards and everything
with that--much of that is still true in Holland.

LDG: I see evidence of that all the time.

LP: Holland is very neat. People do take an interest in that which they have. Very
much so.

LDG: How do you feel about our recent visit by, Margriet, the princess?

LP: I think that was fine.

LDG: And about the wonderful statue of Albertus in Centennial Park?

LP: Oh, yes. It's very nicely done and the one over in Kollen Park that we have over
there. I remember when Queen Wilhelmina, that would be the Princess's great-
grandmother, was here too. I remember that very well, because I drove my mother
and a couple of other Holland ladies over here to Hope College and College Avenue
to see the Queen. And of course, I remember when Juliana was here, many of
those people.

LDG: What a wonderful heritage!

LP: Yes, and that heritage has remained very much. It's not what it used to be, but
that's not to be expected.

LDG: It's so interesting that you have towns like Holland, Overisel, Drenthe, and all of
these have similar communities in Holland, in the Netherlands. It's very exciting.

LP: Yes.
LDG: And as you probably know we have a sister city that is Queretaro, which is in Mexico. There is this wonderful communication between the two cities. That has been very gratifying too.

LP: Sure, things have changed in the Netherlands a great deal. For example...

LDG: Have you visited the Netherlands?

LP: No.

LDG: You've never gone back?

LP: No, but on the other hand my brother's been back, my sister was back there, my mother was back there.

LDG: I'm sure they keep you informed of what is happening.

LP: Yes. The family that I came from were all very interested in education. In fact, my cousin was in the department of mathematics at the University of Gronigen, in the northern Netherlands. Then for a year or so, he taught in Kentucky in the university over there. His wife was teaching in the field of psychology. He has three daughters, one of them came back and spent a summer at Michigan State University over here. She came to this country because Michigan State was doing a research project on the potato and she was doing that in the Netherlands, so she came over here and was a part of that research group. Most of the Dutch kids now, when they finish school, they speak English as well as Dutch. They all learn to speak English in school. But then that is happening all over. It doesn't make any difference. I was talking to my son-in-law who was in Germany. I said, "Any trouble with the language?" And he said, "No, they all speak English." I talked to
my other son-in-law, the one who is Italian and he was on business in Italy--he told me the same thing, "No, you don’t have to bother, all those people speak English."

I talked to my other son-in-law who is over near Milwaukee and he had been in the Far East and said, "Where ever I was, Korea and other places, no problem; they all speak English, also." People who are doing business have people there to use the English language. It’s getting to be a world wide language, I’m quite sure.

LDG: Wonderful.

LP: My wife and I spent a semester teaching over at Garden Grove, where Bob Schuller is in Garden Grove Church.

LDG: Did your wife teach, as well?

LP: No, but I taught a course there. I knew Bob when he was in seminary. He was just a couple years ahead of me. I would have been ahead of him, probably, but I spent time doing other things. That was a nice experience to be there.

LDG: Would you ever, at any point, like to visit the Netherlands? Go back? Have you done much travelling?

LP: In this country, Canada and so on, but otherwise not a great deal. It would be interesting to go back and to see the place where I was born. But I never had a particular yen to go back.

LDG: Do you ever read any of the stuff that is put out by Randy VandeWater and Marion de Velder and people who have this tremendous interest.

LP: Randy VandeWater I have.

LDG: They’ve written a number of texts and books.
LP: Yes, Randy has done some interesting things.

LDG: Do you ever go over to the Holland Museum?

LP: Yes, I’ve been there.

LDG: And seen all those wonderful Bibles and the great clock that was in the 1939 World Fair and the glass churches?

LP: Oh, yes.

LDG: That’s how I have been learning my Dutch history.

LP: I would be more interested in the work that Huizenga is doing in the building that Hope College owns right here on Eighth Street where they preserving a lot of the Dutch literature, with Elton Bruins. I had a number of Dutch books that I had collected and they are all in there.

LDG: You contributed them?

LP: Oh yes, because there they will take care of them.

LDG: That is the Albertus Van Raalte Institute that Elton Bruin is involved with?

LP: Yes, and Huizenga is interested in this.

LDG: Who is Huizenga?

LP: They were the original people in Waste Management—the garbage people. His father used to be in the garbage business, but as they expanded they were really on the ground floor of that big company. Later on, they sold it. That’s why he can do this kind of thing. One of the other Huizengas has one of the charter school in town.

LDG: Black River Academy, I think.
LP: Yes, sure. You see that family and you know that statue of Van Raalte—that’s a gift of Huizengas. They are very wealthy people.

LDG: Where you ever involved in athletics, or do you follow Hope College’s teams in soccer, football, baseball, basketball?

LP: I’ve never been much on athletics, so I’ve never done much of that.

LDG: Where you ever on any teams while you were at Hope College?

LP: No, in high school either. I didn’t care much for that.

LDG: Do you have any hobbies now that you are interested in and do?

LP: Reading.

LDG: What type of reading do you do, beside religious texts?

LP: Now it bothers me a whole lot that my eyes are getting bad. You see what that does to what I love to do. When I read, I read books and journals—for example, the Weekly Standard. It’s a secular journal. This is rather new; I was a charter subscriber. Or, I read Commentary, which is the Jewish journal. Probably as scholarly a journal as you have in the country; excellent! Very top stuff. That’s a monthly and they carry articles on various areas of life. When you read Commentary, you may be sure that you are reading by people who are tops in their field. I love that; I think Commentary is an education in itself. I love to read that. I don’t bother much with Time and Newsweek and so on. After all, I can read a newspaper better than they can, probably.

LDG: Is there anything on television that interests you?

LP: We watch news and discussion groups, that’s deteriorating very rapidly.
LDG: Do you watch PBS, public broadcasting?

LP: Yes.

LDG: They just had a wonderful documentary on Louis Merryweather and Clark. That was on Monday and Tuesday night. I don't know if you are interested in historical dramas or sagas of the United States.

LP: Oh yes.

LDG: There are a lot of chaps that are in HASP who are interested in Civil War history.

LP: Oh, yes. There is a man in Holland here...

LDG: In fact, HASP just taught a course. Did you know a Don Den Uyl was a member of HASP who's moved to Florida?

LP: Yes, I know him.

LDG: He was a civil war buff, too.

LP: He used to be with the tax department of the State of Michigan.

LDG: And he was also treasurer of HASP, before he left.

LP: That's right.

LDG: He was probably here when it started.

LP: Yes, he was one of the early ones.

LDG: And his wife, Jean, I think.

LP: Sure. How are you getting along? With this many people being interviewed, you ought pick up a lot of different information, but also through different viewpoints.

LDG: I guess, selfishly, this is one of the reasons I did it, so that I could learn from people like you who have lived here most of their lives, and so I can ingratiate
myself into the community. I’ve done it a number of ways. One is by speaking to people like yourself. One is by becoming a docent at the Holland Museum and learning about Holland history there. Reading books by Randy VandeWater and Elton Bruins. I’m very interested in history.

LP: Yes, Elton and I are very good friends, because we both taught in the same department. Elton and I talk about the history of Holland often. Elton has done an excellent job in this.

LDG: Well, Reverend Dr. Lambert Ponstein, it has been a real pleasure to interview you. I have learned so much, and all of your wisdom that you have extolled today will now be placed in the Sesquicentennial Oral History Project for people like myself and others to review. Thank you very much; it has been a pleasure.

LP: Thank you. Glad to do that.