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Shackson, Marion Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Abstract (subjects in order of general appearance in transcript): Onaway, Cleveland, Mt. Pleasant, Mr. E.E. Fell, teaching in Holland, Longfellow and Washington schools, a clean town, the Depression, pay-cuts for teachers, the Methodist Church, winter, blue laws, West Ottawa Schools, changes in the schools, changes in living, the changing downtown, Meyer's Music, Westshore Mall, WWII, Kollen Park, HASP, parents' history, the hospital, Hope College, her brother, housing level in Holland, Tulip Time beginnings, Bill Connelly, Mrs. Telling, the Reformed Church in Holland, Gwendolyn Hartman, growth of churches, the new area center, charter schools, Haworth and Prince corporations, racial cultures in Holland, decrease of Dutch influence, changes for women, and her love for Holland.
TLB: The first thing that I would like you to do is state your name, your date of birth, and where you were born.

MS: My name is Marion Shackson. I was born in Onaway, Michigan on December 15, 1905. I was born up there, because my aunt couldn’t come down and take care of my mother in Cleveland, where we were living. She was taken ill, so my grandparents said, "Why don’t you come home?" So mother went home, and she had me born. She had such a good time up there that she didn’t want to go back home. She was there about three months, at Onaway, I think. That is why I was born in Onaway.

TLB: Then you went back to Cleveland, after the three months?

MS: Yes.

TLB: How long did you live in Cleveland?

MS: Until I was in sixth grade. Then we moved back to Onaway, because my father’s health broke down. He had to go back to sell his newspaper in Cleveland.

TLB: When did you move to Holland the first time?

MS: In 1928, I came here to teach school. I was going to Mount Pleasant. My sister and I came together; which was unusual. A superintendent of schools, Mr. E. E. Fell, came to interview teachers at Mount Pleasant. He said to us, "I like sisters." We were so happy, because we wanted to go together. We had a chance to go to Detroit, but one person had to teach outside, and one had to teach in (the city). One could go to Flint, but one person had to teach in the suburbs. When he said, "I like sisters," we jumped
at the chance to come to Holland.

TLB: So you came together to Holland?

MS: Came together as sisters. We lived together in Lida Rogers home the first year.

TLB: What grades did you start out teaching?

MS: I started out with fifth grade at Longfellow school. It was a very very hard grade, I think that there happened to be a bunch of hard children to handle. I had some wonderful children too. Many parents invited me into their homes, so I got a chance to know the parents. At the end of the year, I asked the superintendent if I could transfer to Washington school, because another girl that I had gotten acquainted with wanted to do departmental work. We started that for the first time in Holland. Mr. Fell was very innovative and he said, "Yes, let's try it." So she taught the subjects she liked, and I taught the subjects I liked. We moved back and forth across the hall, and it was a very congenial sort of arrangement.

TLB: You started that where?

MS: It started in Washington School. It was the first departmental teaching, way back in 1930.

TLB: That seems kind of early.

MS: Yes. He was quite a foresighted superintendent, because I heard that he had the first orthopedic department in Michigan too. It was the first place for just crippled children. That was unusual too.

TLB: What were some of your first impressions of Holland?

MS: One of the first things that I remember is seeing the people scrubbing their houses on
the outside. I had never seen that before. I thought, "My goodness, what am I coming to? This is such a clean town." I was a little bit awed by that. People were very neat. You didn’t see anything on the street. Children were very clean at school. We had one family that was Indian in town. There were no black children, no Spanish children. They were all Dutch children, or other nationalities. They were such nice, well-kept, clean children. It was fun to teach them.

TLB: How long did you teach?

MS: Altogether I taught forty-five years. I taught two years in a country school before I came Holland. Then I taught forty-three in these schools.

TLB: What are some ways that Holland was different from where you spent your childhood?

MS: I was thinking of one big difference. That is the salary. When I came I got $1,200 a year. We lived on that for a year, and then the Depression came along in '29. The school board didn’t have any money, so they went to the teachers. I was made president of the HEA, in 1930. They said, "We’ve got to vote ourselves a reduction in salary, because they didn’t have any money." They had to give us script. Script is paper money. People were leery of it. To pay your health insurance you had to get a friend to take your script to buy their groceries in order for you to get the money to send away. I did that. Mr. Hartman was my "Godsend." He took my script and used it for groceries so that I could keep my insurance up. Then the teachers voted to take a 33.3% pay-cut, which was most unusual. I don’t think that we could get them to do that today. But we teachers voted to take a third cut. I remember the next year, I got $900 salary. Then that was the lowest. But we survived. It is surprising, but you
made due. Of course, we got hamburger three pounds for a quarter. Our gasoline was six gallons for a dollar. Our rent was twenty-five dollars a month. So all these things were proportioned. But we didn’t buy any clothes. We didn’t buy any foolish things at all. I don’t remember going down and buying a soda, or buying anything that was unnecessary. We lived on the essentials. We survived. We were healthy, and we were happy.

TLB: Do you remember anything unique about Holland during the Depression? Businesses, or banks?

MS: The banks closed. My sister had worried because she had saved a little bit of money. She was afraid that she would never get it back. So one of the furniture companies in town told her that he would take her script. So she saved her script up, and she bought a bedroom suite. She paid $100 for it. It was the most beautiful bedroom suit, and she used it until her death. It was beautiful. It had a bed, a dresser, a vanity, a chest of drawers, a bed-stand, and a rocking chair. It was the whole thing. It was Sligh Furniture, beautiful furniture. That I remember was a big bargain. Everybody was poor. Nobody had any money. The town really survived on faith. The churches had to go around asking people to donate money for coal for the church. We would give maybe $2.00. That is the way we survived that terribly cold winter.

Later on we had a fire in our church. The church burned down twelve years ago.

TLB: What church was that?

MS: Methodist Church. The round church on 9th and 10th Street. Very pretty church.
TLB: Do you remember any other winters in Holland that were particularly bad?

MS: We had some very cold winters. I remember walking to school one time, and the snow came up to my waist. We had no other way of going, except walking. We had no bus service or anything. Mr. Fell called me, and said you better go down to the school, and tell the teachers not to come. There isn’t going to be any school today. I remember wading through that snow up to my waist, and the teachers didn’t come either. It was a journey for nought. But he wanted to be sure that they were notified that there was no school. That was the worst storm we had. I don’t remember what year that was, but it was in the Depression years.

I remember another thing about Holland, none of the stores were open on Sunday. None of them, even grocery stores. You had a very difficult time getting a loaf of bread on a Sunday. One little store over here on 16th Street, you could get a loaf of bread. If company came in and you needed bread, you could go there and get bread and milk. But the stores were all closed, the gas stations were closed. You had to plan ahead. That is one difference; that is one big difference, I think. People stayed home; went to church. There was a church on every corner, as there still is. That was a big difference I think between the years.

TLB: Do you want to talk about some of the changes that Holland has gone through?

MS: I have been thinking about some of the changes that have come about during that time. The schools, I don’t think are too much larger today than they were then. You’d think that the city had grown, but what happened is that people have come to West Ottawa district. That is where the people live. That district, the school is about the same size
as Holland now. Of course we have the Christian school in town. We had a Lutheran school, grade school, and a Catholic school. Our school population I don’t think is too much different. We used to have big classes. I had forty-two the first year I taught school here.

TLB: In one class?

MS: Yes, in one class. Forty-two children. I had five A and five B, like two sections. That was quite common, thirty-five to forty children. When I went to Washington it was reduced quite a bit, because the rooms were smaller. I was glad of that. It was very nice to have twenty-six to twenty-seven in a room.

TLB: That is a lot for elementary.

MS: Children learn from each other, and it is just what you are used to I guess. I don’t think that you have to have a tiny classroom to have good teaching going on. They talk about that as being the essential thing. You’ve got to have a class of twenty. The new charter school - you can’t have over twenty. You can have twenty-five children in a classroom, and still do a good job of teaching. It depends on the teacher, a lot on the teacher. And the cooperation of the children, of course. I don’t think you have to keep a class under twenty to have good teaching.

TLB: How did the schools change in the forty years that you were teaching?

MS: The teachers were friendlier. They were closer to each other. You would have parties. We would have monthly parties together. We would have at least one at Christmas time. We would have special celebrations. We would have potlucks, and then have a party afterwards. One time, I was head of the recreation part of the
H.E.A., they don’t even have that anymore. I planned a square dance party. We had done that up North, and it was fun. We had a teacher, Mr. Moran, who was willing to call the calls. I planned this party, and we had it in the high school gym. We had a nice crowd there, and we were having a wonderful time. Everything was lovely. Mr. Fell came to the party. He didn’t say a word to me. He looked around, and saw that we were having a good time. He went home. Then the next day he came to my principal, and he said, "Why would they have dancing in the school?" [laughter] And I was called on the carpet. That has changed a great deal since then. Everything has changed.

TLB: Has teaching become different? Were you teaching when technology increased?

MS: I think that I can see some difference. I have been out of it a long time. We didn’t have computers. We didn’t have a lot of the things that they have today. But I do think that children learn from each other, and that they are a little more cooperative in working with the teacher. Teacher was the boss, teacher was the leader. I never had a child talk back to me. I never had a child swear in my classroom. I didn’t realize that that happened in a classroom, until I did some substituting. Then I found quite a different picture, and I was shocked, because children really did respect me. They said, "Oh, Miss Shackson we respect you." They said that to me when I retired. Well, I didn’t know what they were talking about until I found it myself. Children didn’t come to class without a book, without a pencil. They expected to work. That was what school was for. I went to other classes afterward, to see that they came to class without anything to work with, and I didn’t know what to do with them. Here
they were coming to be entertained. So sometimes I dashed home and got my pictures from my travels, and entertained them. I didn’t know where they were in the class, in their books. I didn’t know what they were studying, and I had to hold them for an hour, and I had to keep them quiet. So I went home, and brought my pictures from either Spain, or my trip to the East, or China. Something to entertain them. That worked out.

TLB: What about some other changes?

MS: Since I lived here. I think that people are living so much better today. They’re more extravagant. Throwing things away, they don’t save like they used to. I remember, my first car I bought second hand, and took care of it. I still buy second hand cars. I guess I have had one new car over the years. Most of my cars have been second hand, and they have worked pretty well. I think that the traffic in town is the thing that has changed the most. It seems like, we never had to wait to cross Van Raalte Avenue. Never. Now we get there and we have to wait, and wait. Particularly when people are getting out of work. It is a long wait to get across. I’ve noticed that.

All the malls have changed our downtown. Downtown was the center of our community. I am sorry to see that change, because that is where you went to buy a new dress, or a new coat, shoes, stockings, everything. The clothing line was there. The hat line. We used to wear hats. The milliners were there. That was the center of town. We even had grocery stores on the main street of town. Everything. I am sorry that it has sort of become a place for specialty shops now. No, nothing that I would want. Those are things for young people, or young brides. I think that
Teerman's kind of holds their own. I think that there are a few stores. Lokker-Rugers are holding their own. But they don't have the trade they used to have. The crowds are not there like they used to be. Even Meyer's Music Shop, I understand, is leaving now. They have been there since 1902. That is a long time to be in one spot.

TLB: Meyer's Music?

MS: Yes, I'm sorry that they had to go. They are all going north. They are all going to the Mall. I don't particularly enjoy the Mall, because it is a long walk from you car to get into the Mall. And then before, you could park right behind or in front of the store and walk right in. You could pick up what you wanted. It was much more convenient for older people. I've noticed that. Young people, I suppose, don't care as much. For older people it is a chore to shop at the mall. It is not any fun.

TLB: It is always such a busy place too.

MS: Yes, and it is getting bigger all the time. You have to walk and walk to find what you want. I think that Meijer's is plenty big enough. I don't like the great big stores, you get lost and have trouble finding what you want. People are very nice about telling you where things are, and occasionally they will even get it for you.

TLB: Do you remember what Holland was like during World War II?

MS: Well, I was fortunate, in a way. My brother died in 1939, the only brother I had. So he missed the war. There were four girls. We were all teachers. All five children were teachers. My brother taught at Hope College. I was the oldest girl. I came with my younger sister, Ramona, to Holland together in 1928-29. She died in 1976. And the youngest sister died in 1983. The last sister died a year ago, so I am the only one
left. Oldest one, and the last. I live here alone in this big house, and everybody say I'm crazy. They say, "Why don't you go into a condo or an apartment?" But there is something about this old home, and this old furniture that fits this old home. I would have to get rid of this old stuff, and buy new stuff to make it look pretty. I don't think that this old furniture would fit into a modern apartment condo. I am just hoping that my nieces and nephews will want some of this stuff. And they do.

[discussion on moving]

I love being near Kollen Park. I love the lake, and I love seeing the water. I love to watch my flowers grow, pull a few weeds when I go outside. You can't do it in a condo. I pick flowers and take them to friends in nursing homes.

I enjoy the HASP group in town. It is a new group. The Holland Association of Senior Professionals. It is made up of older people who have retired. It is a mixture of teachers, lawyers, and doctors that have retired, a cross section, mechanical engineers and all kinds of people. We have interesting programs. About 280 people in it, and it is growing all the time. We had a picnic last week in Kollen Park. About 77 of us came, and listened to the music of the American Legion Band. It was very nice. It was not too warm, but these are fun things to do.

TLB: You were talking about what World War II was like in Holland. Do you remember what stood out about that?

MS: We lived simply. We didn’t have the luxuries. We had to save. Teachers were asked to pass out rationing books. These meant that you could only buy so much sugar, and so much flour on a ration book. You were rationed quantities. They didn’t want
people to hoard. I am sure that some people probably did before the war got started, but we didn’t. We were given that job, and we did it without pay. We wouldn’t even think of asking money for that job. We went down there after school, and we worked for four or five hours, never thinking how much we were going to get for this. It was our patriotic duty to help the war effort. So we did it. We lived on ration books. Gasoline ration was one thing we had to watch. We couldn’t go North. We had a little cottage in Northern Michigan. In 1943, we couldn’t go that year, because there wasn’t enough gas. That was the only year that we missed.

TLB: Where was your cottage?

MS: Up by the Straits of Mackinaw, on Black Lake. The town is Onaway, nearby, which has an interesting history, itself. My mother was a little girl when she went there, back in 1872. Her father was the first teacher there, and the first man to open up the town. That is a history in itself.

TLB: Where did you parents come from before?

MS: My mother lived in Onaway, and my father lived in Cleveland. Then they got together, and my mother lived in Cleveland, until we moved back to Onaway. And that is where I attended school from sixth grade on. There are advantages in a small school. There were just thirty-six in our graduating class. We were a very closely knit group, and we had wonderful teachers. The reason we had such excellent teachers was because the school board was made up of men who were executives in Labdell-Emery, the only factory in town which made wood steering rims for cars. It was the only one in the world. I didn’t know that until last year when a man said, "You know
the old saying Onaway steers the world?" I said, "Yes." He said, "That meant that Onaway was the only place that made steering wheels made of wood for cars, and bicycle rims." That was the only factory. They had about 1,200 employees at one time. It was quite a thriving little town. When that factory burned in 1926, the whole thing became a ghost town. It was kind of sad.

I graduated from high school in 1924. The teachers were so good, because the school board members were executives in this company. They were smart men. They went down to Ann Arbor and Lansing to pick out the very top teachers, because they paid more in that little town than they did in Jackson, or Detroit, or any of the bigger cities. We got the "cream of the crop." So we benefitted by getting excellent teachers. I think that is what makes a school. I think that it is school teacher, not the building, and not the equipment. It is the teacher. She inspires the kids, and is smart enough to make you want to learn. That is the secret, and we got excellent teachers.

TLB: Do you have any other changes about the town?

MS: Let me check. I think that I did say that stores closed on Sunday. Nothing was open on Sunday, except for churches. I think that that was the biggest change that came by. I remember when it first happened. Meijer's was the first store. People had a big item in the paper, "We will not trade at Meijer's, because they are opening on Sunday." The ministers lead that drive. But if you think about it, some people have to, such as the Seventh Day Adventists. What do they do? Some people have to work. I don't trade on Sunday, regularly, but at the same I think that it is a good thing that they have it for those that have to shop on Sunday. They are very busy on Sunday.
TLB: Especially for someone who might work in a hospital, or something. The only day they have to shop is Sunday.

MS: The hospital has certainly grown over the years. It was that little tiny building when I first came to Holland. Now, I think that it has extended three times. The equipment has changed greatly. They have wonderful modern equipment now. The doctor’s offices have changed a great deal. I think that the doctors, themselves, have more equipment to work with. They used to take much more time with you. I think that it was more of a one to one conversation in those days. The doctor knew you, knew your family, he knew all about you. He was a personal advisor.

TLB: And that has changed?

MS: That has changed. Now, I don’t know if my doctor knows anything about me. He knows my name, and that is about it. I go in for about fifteen minutes, and then I am out in less than that time. And I think that he doesn’t know one thing about me. The other doctors used to take more time. I can see that over the years.

TLB: What about Hope College? Have you noticed how Hope College has changed?

MS: Yes, I think that that has grown considerably. I am trying to think. My brother taught there from 1935 to 1939. He died, the doctor told me ten years later that they gave him too strong of an injection of anaesthetic. I didn’t know that until ten years after he was gone. He had to have a surgery, and he died in surgery. He came here, and he loved Hope College. He was head of the Speech Department. He said that the kids were so cooperative. He didn’t have to worry about them going out and getting drunk. If they were going on a debating trip, he knew that he wouldn’t have to worry.
At the junior college, he taught at before he came here, he had to worry. The kids would go out, and not follow any orders. He said the college kids were really nice to work with. I remember that as a difference.

The college was much smaller. I don’t remember the enrollment in those days, but I know now that they are trying to keep at 3,000. I don’t think they were even half that a few years ago. It was more personal. My brother knew the kids he had in class; he knew their names. They came to the house here to see him. It was a different atmosphere. I can feel the difference. Many didn’t live in dorms; they rented rooms in homes. I kept a few boys, after the war, here at my house, because they were just desperate for rooms at Hope College. They asked for anybody to open up their homes to these boys that were coming home from they war. They had been in Special Services, and then came to Hope College. I thought that I could do that. I made my den into a bedroom for them, put in bunkbeds. I had some nice boys, for a few years.

TLB: I bet it was interesting to learn what it was like during the war.

MS: Yes. They were boys who served their time, and then they came to Hope College to get their education free. The boys that stayed with me paid, I think, $2.00 a week rent. They were all nice boys. They got their meals at the College, so I didn’t have to worry about getting them anything to eat. They took their laundry home. They were well behaved, and we enjoyed them.

TLB: What are some qualities that stand out concerning the city of Holland?

MS: Qualities? [TB: Yes.] I think that Holland is a very fine town. Everybody that
comes to Holland will say what a clean town it is. They mention that the first thing,
how well people keep up their homes and their yards. That has always been true.
Even when I came here, I was shocked how beautiful people kept their yards and their
homes. I think that that has not changed over the years. You don’t find slums in
Holland. Even these houses that they want to tear down. I am concerned, because
they are not slums. They are simpler homes, but they are not slummy homes. They
are well cared for. They are painted, and they are home. They’ve lived there all their
life, and if you moved them out into some little condo or apartment someplace they
are not going to be happy.

I think the town itself is nice. We have Kollen Park. We didn’t have as many
parks; we had Centennial Park, and Kollen Park. Those were our main two parks.
Now we have added to that; we have many grand parks. We have parks on the
Westside for the swimming area. We have the park with the swimming pool over by
the cemetery. Russ’s gave that swimming pool. We had that before we built our
other swimming pool. We have two of them now. Now they want to enlarge that
one, I think. That shows growth. Tunnel Park, and the State Park was free in those
days. We didn’t have to pay to go out there for picnics. Now you have to pay to get
in. The Boulevard is here, they have always kept that beautiful.

They started Tulip Time in 1930, or 1931. I was here when it was first started.
All the teachers were asked to wear costumes to school. We did for a whole week.
We all bought material, and had them make a costume for us. And everybody did it;
every teacher was very cooperative. And the children dressed up that week. We made
quite a deal. We all marched in the parade with them, in our costumes. They still do that. That is when it started.

TLB: Did you know the person who started Tulip Time?

MS: I did. I am going to talk about this on September 12th. It bothers me that they give credit to Lida Rogers, who does not really deserve the credit for starting Tulip Time. They all say that Lida Rogers started it. She did not start Tulip Time. Because I lived at her house, I know a little about her. She did give a talk at the Literary Club. She talked about people putting flowers in their front yard to beautify the town. But the man that started Tulip Time was a man by the name of Bill Connelly. He was hired by the Chamber of Commerce, as a promoter, as the Chamber of Commerce leader. He wanted to do something to promote the city. He started Tulip Time. He even got a woman that I know who was a dancing teacher, Atalea Clark. Roest was her name then, to make up a Dutch dance, dress the people up in costumes, go up to Muskegon and get them to come down here for Tulip Time. She did that and that was about in 1931. She was the one that told me this; I wouldn't have know this. I thought the teachers at school started the Dutch dance. She said, "No, I started it, because Mr. Bill Connelly asked me to make up one. I didn't even know what a Dutch dance was." So these dances that the teachers made up were really started with her initiative. Bill Connelly was not here very long. He got the thing moving, and he called it "Tulip Time."

The people, I remember Mrs. Telling very well. She said, "Let's not make any girl a Queen of Tulip Time; let's make the Tulip the Queen." And they have never
had a Queen in Tulip Time. They have a Blossom Queen, and they have an Asparagus Queen, and they have all kinds of Queens, but we don’t have a Tulip Queen.

TLB: That is unusual; I never thought of that.

MS: Mrs. Telling was the one that said that, and I think that everybody has gone with it over the years. The Latin Americans do have a Queen, but that is not really for Tulip Time.

TLB: We talked about the qualities of Holland, are their any negative aspects to Holland, or any drawbacks to living in Holland?

MS: Well, when I came here I thought that I would stay five years, and then move on to someplace else. That was my thought, but I got my roots down. I guess I enjoyed my church so much, and the friends I made. I like Holland. I never wanted to move. It never even crossed my mind to think of applying someplace else. I just loved teaching the kids here, and I loved the atmosphere of the town. It is a nice town. It is located near the big lake, which makes it cooler. Living down near Kollen Park, is even cooler for me in the summer time. I can’t think of any negative aspects. I think that people who are critical are people from outside, who want to compare it to a big city, or something they are used to. But if you have lived here almost all your life, like I have, it is home and I wouldn’t want to change it.

TLB: Did you ever consider switching from the Methodist Church to the Reformed Church because of its strong influence, or did you always stick to your church?

MS: When I first came to Holland, a school board member told me that if I wanted to be
anybody in this town I wouldn’t go to the Methodist Church. That hurt me. I thought, "Why would she say that?" I think that she was thinking that very ordinary people went to the Methodist church, and that they had to struggle to make ends meet. She said, "People that are somebody go to the Reformed Church." I must have been stubborn, because I thought that I was not going to follow that at all and I went to the church of my choice. I did visit other churches. When I first came, I came with a small town background. I was a Methodist up there. I was going to a new town, so I decided to try the other churches. I did. I went to two or three other churches, but I didn’t feel the friendliness and the warmth.

Maybe it is partly in my head, but Mrs. Hartman was warm to me, and so kind. She put her arm around me and said, "We need you." Just that alone made me feel wanted and needed. I thought Sunday school, and I got in the choir. Then I became part of the church. I wouldn’t think of changing. That has always been my church. I loved it, and I worked with it all these years. It has grown considerably. We had a wonderful Sunday school class, we had about 100 people in our class. The core of my religious life was in this church, because Mrs. Hartman was the teacher. She was a wonderful person. She inspired all of us to do our best in every way. She inspired me to live my best. I still think that she is the most outstanding women, next to my mother. I’ve written about her, and talked about her many times, because she gave of herself. She really gave of herself to bring in young people, to make them feel at home, and to visit them. She would have engagement parties for them. She knew everything to make people feel comfortable, and happy. She was a wonderful person.
TLB: What was her first name?

MS: Her name was Gwendolyn Hartman. Her husband was Mr. Ernest Hartman. She died quite young with gall bladder cancer. I know that I gave blood for it. Afterward, they told me that I shouldn’t have given blood for it, because I had jaundice when I was young. So I contaminated somebody, I am afraid, with jaundice. But anyway, I did give blood for her. She died, and her husband remarried. He was on the school board for awhile. She was an outstanding women in this town. Anybody who ever knew her would tell you the same thing that I am telling you. It was nothing personal; she was just an outstanding person. She is the one who got me going in the church.

TLB: How have churches changed in Holland?

MS: I don’t think that they are as friendly, and close as we used to be. They are bigger. There are so many new people coming in, that we don’t know. As we grow older, and they are younger we have a generation gap. We don’t have as much in common. We don’t even know the names of the young people coming in. We just don’t get acquainted with them. They have their groups, and we have our older groups. We don’t get acquainted like we used. We are wearing name-tags, for the first time now at church. I sat with a stranger two Sundays ago. The trouble is, if you sit with people you know then you still don’t get acquainted as well as you should. They try to have coffee afterwards, and they try to get people mixed up. I think that you sit with your friends.

This girl, Fern Geiser, who was lost, was my closest friend. She sat with me in church every Sunday. I miss her terribly. I am sure she drowned. I am sure she
walked off the end of the Pier.

TLB: Oh, the women who is missing?

MS: Yes, her family must be suffering terribly--not knowing. It has been three weeks now that she has been gone. I think that she had the beginning of Alzheimer's. She wasn't quite herself. Her son-in-law told me that she got lost for two hours one time. Another time she got lost for four hours. I think that she just got confused. She didn't know where she was. She was supposed to be at a party where I was going, but she never arrived. It was a sad story. I think she just didn't know where she was. I used to walk with her on the Pier many times. We used to walk out, and watch the sun set. We enjoyed Lake Michigan. That is where her car was. They found it out there still running at 7:30 at night. It is a sad story.

TLB: Yes, very sad.

MS: These are some of life's heartaches. So many of my friends are in nursing homes, or are gone. I've had to be the last leaf of the tree, it feels like. I've been to so many funerals this year, many of my friends. You have to expect that when you get as old as I am.

TLB: I can imagine how difficult it must be. [pause] Have there ever been any controversies in Holland?

MS: Controversies? I think there is one right now. The big controversy is this area center. I think that is going to be a real fight.

TLB: The new area center?

MS: Yes, I just can't see it in that spot. Taking down all those homes. I think that is
wrong. They could go to the General Electric, which is empty. It has all that space to park in. I think that is an ideal spot for it. It is only four blocks from the college. If they are thinking about college kids getting there, they could walk. They come running down here everyday. They certainly can walk four blocks out there to skate. I think that is a big controversy, and I will certainly vote against it. I don’t think that we should tear down those people’s homes to make an area center there. The paper today said that they are thinking very seriously about it. It cost nine million dollars more, because they are going to build a great big multi-story parking space. That is going to cost nine million dollars. That is ridiculous. It just isn’t necessary when they have all that space out at the General Electric plant.

I think that the charter schools, in my mind, is a controversy.

[tape is flipped here]

discussion on oral histories

TLB: What were we talking about before I flipped the tape? Oh, charter schools.

MS: Yes, well I don’t know if you want me to tell this or not. Maybe I shouldn’t say this. I just feel that it is such a mistake to have charter schools. I think that it is a waste of money. I think that we don’t have big classes. First of all, we have good teachers. We have small classes in Holland. We have all this equipment. We have everything available for them: swimming pools, athletics, the music, the arts. All these things that children need for a well rounded education. I can’t see how a charter school can do a better job than a public school can. They say that they are going to keep their count down to twenty. Well, we have classes of twenty in the high school. I don’t
think they know that our classes are not big. I think that twenty-five is the highest as any class goes. One of the people said that we (Holland) doesn’t have as many graduates that go on to college. I said, "I am sure that you are wrong on that. I think that 76% of the students went on to further education when I was teaching." That was long ago. I think that it would be higher today. What they should do is investigate to see how many of the seniors go on for further education today. Look at how many merit scholars we have in Holland. It is wonderful in Holland, how many students are valedictorians. They are bright kids. They don’t get that from reading a book; they get that from a cross section of learning, different teachers, and different experiences. They have to have that. I think that our public schools in Holland are some of the best in the state. Maybe I am prejudiced, because I am a teacher.

TLB: There was an article in, I think, USA Today. It said that Holland schools were rated some of the best.

MS: I have said that before. Why they want to start a charter school here, I can’t understand. They are going to use this old factory down here. I can’t see that as being as nice a school as Washington school. That is a beautiful school now. They renovated, so that it is just beautiful inside. The woodwork is pretty. They have a little work room along with the classroom. I think that is most unusual for any school to have. That is marvelous. Committees meet together. Another teacher can come in to give special training on things like speech problems. I just can’t see it. You can’t do that at a charter school. You can’t have all these extra things.

TLB: I’ve heard that charter schools don’t have to provide special education.
MS: No. I think that it has gotten into some people’s bonnets that their children are a little better than other children. They want their children separated from other people’s children. Whether they don’t want them mixed with blacks, or Spanish, I don’t know what it is that is in their heads. I think that is something like that. They probably won’t admit it, but they are trying to be selective with whom they choose. They say that they won’t be picky, but you wait and see.

TLB: As a future teacher, I agree. I am afraid that these little schools will really take away from the public schools.

MS: And it takes money too. They have already let three teachers go, in the public schools, because of lack of money. They have taken all that money away. It is already hurting. I can’t understand the thinking at all. Maybe at the end of the year we will know better.

TLB: You never know.

MS: I just don’t understand it, myself.

TLB: What do you think the effect of industry has been on Holland, and how has industry changed in Holland?

MS: That has changed a great deal. We used to have furniture factories as the basis. We had three or four furniture factories here. They made nice furniture. And there was the Holland Furnace. That was a big industry. There were some foundries.

Now with Haworth, and the Prince Corporation. I think Haworth makes partitions, mostly, for offices and so on. They are going world wide. It is a multi-million dollar industry. I taught with Jerry Haworth. He was teacher at East Junior
High, when we had overflow. We had to put seventh grade over at East Junior High School in an old building that we had closed up. We opened it again. Jerry taught manual arts, and I taught English seventh grade. So I knew him rather personally. He taught a couple of years, and then he decided that he would like to have a little shop in his garage. He started out making these partitions in his garage. Then he went into business. He told this to a group of retired high school teachers. I heard him say, "I borrowed $5,000 from my parents to start the business." He started a business making partitions. It went so well, he hired a couple of teachers that were manual arts teachers. They worked for him, rather than for the school. The first thing you know, he just took off. He made himself into a multimillionaire. Awfully nice guy.

TLB: Yes, I have meet them. His wife is an English teacher.

MS: I had her in sixth grade, and I also had her as a student teacher. I know Edna very well. She is his second wife. He had children with his first wife. She died young, and left him a family. But he and Edna have made a wonderful marriage, and I am so happy that they found each other. They are both outstanding people.

TLB: What do you make of the different cultures that have come to Holland: the Hispanics, the African-Americans, and others?

MS: I think that we have to learn to live in this world with all nationalities and people. I think that is the only way we are going to learn to live together as one nation. I do think that it has changed quite a bit. I don’t think that some of them are taking as good care of their property. They let their houses run down. I think that there is more drinking among them, more stealing. Maybe I am wrong, but whenever I read
the paper about somebody getting in trouble often times it is a Spanish kid that has
gotten in trouble. So I don’t think that they have quite the background. Their parents
have not been educated. They don’t have the desire to make something of themselves.
Their big desire is to get a job, to get married, and have children. That is the big
hope in life for many of them. Of course, there are always exceptions. This little boy
last year, Murillo, he is half Spanish, he was a Merit Scholar last year. Outstanding
boy. So of course, there are always exceptions. Many of them are children that are
just in school, because they have to go. They are not there because they love
education. It is not their fault. It is their cultural background. Their parents didn’t go
to school; their grandparents didn’t go to school. That is not the first item in their
mind. My father, the most important thing in our life was to get an education. He’d
sacrifice anything for an education for his kids. I think that it is a different attitude
toward school. Because of that they get in trouble. I think that they get in these
gangs, because they want to be recognized, and be important. Then they cause
trouble. We never used to have these gangs, or trouble at all. You never heard of
them. It has become the blacks against the Spanish. They are fighting each other. I
don’t think so many white kids are in it. That is what the policemen told me, anyway.
He said that it is mostly the Kings gang, and some other gang. They are blacks
against the Vietnamese, and the Spanish. They click together to be recognized, I
think. That is what causes it.

And then they import them from Chicago. That is what the shooting over here
on 13th Street was a weekend ago. They were from Chicago; it wasn’t even Holland.
They come in because they want to be part of this gang in town, which I can't understand. Maybe they don't have enough to do. Maybe if they were busy they wouldn't do this. They need more jobs.

TLB: What about the Dutch heritage? Does that still have a pretty big influence on Holland?

MS: Not too much, I don't think anymore. I think that it has pretty well died out. I really feel that way. You can go to the Museum, and think of the lovely things that Van Raalte did for the town. That era has been mixed in with other nationalities. I don't even think that the Dutch people even think of themselves that way anymore. Few of them even speak Dutch anymore. Very few.

TLB: When you came to the city, what was it like?

MS: Then there were Dutch people. I had night classes teaching Dutch people to speak English.

TLB: Oh really.

MS: And I had classes teaching Koreans to speak English. I had Koreans, Dutch, and one Vietnamese. I had a class of about ten adults. The Dutch people, they worked, they struggled. They took their workbooks home, and they would get their lessons done, come back the next week with it all completed. Again, there is that urge and interest in education. I didn't find this so true with some of the other people. There is something in their inborn nature, I think they want to make something of themselves.

TLB: A push.

MS: I think that is very true.
TLB: Concentrating on Holland how do you think the role of women has changed?

MS: The role of women. We are much more independent than we used to be. Of course, I have always been independent so I am not a very good one to ask that question. Being a single gal, I've always been very independent. I like to do as I like to do. I was very happy living with my mother and father. They came down and lived with me. I bought the home. They were very agreeable. Anything that I suggested towards doing things together. We were a very happy family.

TLB: Did you ever have anybody object to you buying your own home, or anything like that?

MS: This Mr. Hartman. Mr. Ernest Hartman was the one that helped me buy it. In fact, we rented furnished homes when we first came to Holland. My mother came to keep house for us when both my sister and I were teaching. My sister, Edith, came later. She was teaching here, and my brother was teaching in Grand Rapids. There were four of us teaching school. I think that some people were a little jealous of that; they thought that was too much in one family. My mother came down to keep house for us. We rented a furnished house to live in one year. They had moved to another place, were there a couple years, and then they wanted their house back. We moved around to two or three different places. I thought that this is no good, so Mr. Hartman was the one who helped me. He said, "I've got a good house. It is really a bargain. The man that is selling it wants to get out from under his loan. He borrowed money to buy the house. He is an older man." He made the deal, and I have been very happy ever since.
TLB: And this is the same house?

MS: Yes, same house. I bought it in 1937. The Depression was just over, so I got it at a cheap price. I try to keep it up. Last year, I put vinyl siding on, and I had a new roof put on again. This is the third time. I try to keep it up. It is an old house, but it is home.

TLB: I like all the wood work.

MS: Yes, people always notice that. I never painted over that. It is the original varnish. It hasn't been changed as long as I have lived here. I think that it is a well built house. My dad said, "Oh Marion, you got a good house." And I said, "How can you tell?" He said, "You can tell a good house for in the basement how close the joists are put together, and how heavy the boards are." He noticed that. I don't ever hear it when the trolley goes by once and awhile. I used to live in a house down by the train, and it would always jar. I never feel that in this house, like you would in a house that was made -- of straw. [laughter]

TLB: Can you tell me what you have heard other people say of Holland, when they come to the city?

MS: I think that some people are a little critical. I think that when we first came we were critical of the blue laws that were trying to keep Holland from having stores open. They wanted to get gasoline, but they couldn't. They would come to see you, but they couldn't get gasoline. We had trouble finding places.

I have a wonderful next door neighbor, Winnie Hulsman. She came here in 1941; her husband was blind. She made a wonderful neighbor all these years. She
takes good care of her yard. She is a walker. She walks from here to the post office most every day, and thinks nothing of it. She is a very able woman, and is not young either. She is a very dear neighbor. She brought me some homemade cookies yesterday. That is what she does all the time.

Criticizing Holland, I don't know? Most people come and they will say what a clean town it is. I had company this weekend from Ithaca, New York. They said that this is a nice clean town, and that the parks are pretty. I think that they realize it in comparison with other towns. I feel that all towns are trying to take better care of their towns. If you drive up North. I just came from the North. I thought that even our little town up there in Onaway, what an improvement over the year before. They do have a young man who is a promoter on the Chamber of Commerce. He got them to tear down burned buildings that stood there for years, and to paint some of the other buildings, and to improve the Chandler Park. This, I am very happy about, because my great uncle gave the land for that park. For years it stood there, a nice piece of woods right there in town, right next to his lovely home. He had a lovely home there. The home is gone now, but the trees where there. Then the city said, "We need money." So they let the lumbermen come in and take down all the beautiful trees. That made me just heartsick. I knew that was a park, that was not just public property. Well anyway, that happened quite a few years ago. Now the little ones have grown up to be pretty fair sized trees. This young promoter, I am going to give a lot of credit to. He said that that park should be kept as a park, and improved. He got people interested in the community, and they have leveled it off. They've got a
little gazebo in the middle now for a picnic ground. They have a walk through the park. They want to put lights around there; that is what they are raising money for now. I want to put a sign in the entrance that says, "Chandler Park," because it is named after my great uncle who gave it. I would like to have that name on there. So when I was up there, I went to see the promoter, and he said now we will use Onaway stone to build a big arch over it to put "Chandler Park." I said, "That is wonderful, because my mother had a piano that I sold a year ago. I want to put that money into Chandler Park, in her memory." I was so pleased that he went along with my idea. I came back so happy. I think that is going to materialize. Not right away, maybe, but they have a man in town who does wrought iron work, and he said it could be done. He gave me the estimates, and the bill. They all know that it is Chandler Park now, at least they know that there is a park there. It is right in town. Most towns have a small park. Onaway has had that. It was at the turn of the century when my great uncle gave it to them. It has been there for over 100 years. Now, finally I think we are going to have a park.

TLB: Great. Do you have any final comments toward what it was like when you first came to Holland, or any changes that have happened in Holland?

MS: Well, I came here as a young gal out of college, poor as could be. I owed money, and had to pay it back the first year. I got it paid back. We lived simply. I worked hard. I remember I worked all day in school, and then I would come home and I worked every evening: correcting papers, and making lesson plans. I think that I worked much harder than people do today. We had our Philathea Class every month. We
would have a planned supper and a nice program, and it was something that I looked forward to each month. We went to all the concerts in town, all the thing going on at school, and all the plays. The teachers always supported the things that the kids did. We went to all the high school plays, and all the concerts. We never missed those things. We felt that we should go, because that was part of the schooling. I think that has changed a great deal. Teachers don't go to the plays as much. I look around and I can't find any teachers there supporting the kids like they used to. Maybe they go to the basketball games. I won't say that they don't go to anything. They don't support the plays like they used to, or the forensics and things like that. My nephew lives in Holland now. He came to Holland as a computer analyst. He had two children go through our public school system. They both did very well. His boy now is going to be a lawyer in Ann Arbor. The girl is going to Carleton College in Minnesota. They have profited by a good public school. That is why I know that the schools are good schools. I think that because we were smaller we were closely knit. That is where you made your friends, the other teachers that taught with you. My closest friends were teachers who taught with me, and we were very, very close. Of course, they have all died off; I don't have any of them any more. Like I said, I am the last leaf of the tree, practically. I think that has changed. There was a close "knitness" of the teaching. We really worked hard. We spent our day teaching school, and we never thought about it. One time I did some extra work for a youngster after school, one of the doctor's boys. He needed help in grammar, as he was having difficulty. The doctor's wife came to me and said that she would like to have me tutor her boy after
school and help him with his grammar. She said, "We would like to pay you." I said, "No, that is part of my job. I don't want to be paid for tutoring, or helping a youngster. That is part of my job." I remember saying that to her. She looked at me like she was surprised. She said, "Of course, we will pay you." I said, "That is not right. I am a teacher, and I should help that boy." I remember saying that to her, and I think that she appreciated that. I did help him. He came after school, and I got him straightened around in the grammar. We got along fine.

TLB: Do you have any advice for a future teacher?

MS: I think that you have got to love your work. I think that you have to love teaching above everything else. You have to be interested in education of all kinds. I think that you should travel. I think that travel is a very important part of teaching. I spent all my money that I earned during the year either going to summer school, until I got my Master's, but after I got my Master's, I spent it on travel. I have been to many countries. I think that I counted sixty countries that I have been in. That is what I feel is broadening one's horizons. It makes you appreciate what you have at home. It makes you world wide wiser, and gives you little understanding of the world. We are not the only country that is beautiful. We have wonderful countries in the world. There are beautiful mountains, and valleys, and rivers, and mountain streams. They are beautiful to see: cities, museums, cathedrals, wonderful scenes. I think that is a broadening experience. I think that every teacher should travel, as soon as you can, don't put it off. I think that is part of growing. I felt that was true for me, anyway. I felt that my travels were part of my education.
I didn’t save any money really, until after I retired. I didn’t travel as much, so I was able to put some money away. I don’t have the money in the bank now, like a lot of other people my age have.

TLB: But you enjoyed your travels.

MS: Yes, I enjoyed life, and I was lucky to have good health. I have been very fortunate to be in some of the places that I have been.

TLB: Great, I think that I am done.

[discussion of transcription process]

[end of interview]