Sikkel, William Oral History Interview:
Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Tracy Bednarick

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Interview #7
Mr. William Sikkel
Former Holland Mayor
Holland’s Past Fifty Years

Conducted by:
Tracy Bednarick
June 25, 1996

Abstract (subjects in general order of appearance in the transcript): Family, National Guard service during WWII in New Guinea and the unit’s service in Tokyo (Mr. Sikkel did not go due to health), Holland after the War and Sikkel’s early career, changes in industry and agriculture, shortages after the war, community organizations, HEDCOR, sense of belonging in community, change in agriculture, Civic Center controversy, desire for a marina, traffic planning, growth in Holland, qualities of Holland, being Mayor, current work for the National Guard, Mainstreet Project, Buy a Brick Campaign, military secrecy in WWII, Vietnam War, military career, work in the church and the church’s interaction with the city, pride in the Dutch heritage of Holland, Michigan, Holland Holiday Inn, changing role of women, Pantland Hotel, personal change, Michigan Emergency Volunteer Group, loss of Mayor re-election.
Interviewee: William Sikkel (WS), former Mayor of Holland
Interviewer: Tracy Bednarick (TLB), Oral History Student Coordinator

(An * indicates a question asked after the interview was over, the answer follows in either brackets or parenthesis.)

TLB: My first question if just for you to state your name, your date of birth, and where you were born.

WS: My name is William A. Sikkel. I was born [date removed], 1920 here in Holland.

TLB: Have you lived in Holland all your life?

WS: Yes, except for the time that I was in the service.

TLB: Could you tell me a little bit about when your family? When you met your wife? Your children?

WS: My immediate family? I knew my wife’s family all my life, because I went to school with her brother, was overseas with him, and was in combat with him. When I came back from overseas, after checking in with my family, I checked in with his family to see how he was doing, since he was wounded. In the course of events, my now-wife came walking up the steps and I made a decision that she was going to be my wife and so I married her. That was fifty years ago, a week ago Friday, which would be fifty years ago, Flag Day 1946. We have three children, and we have six grandchildren. Everyone lives in Holland.

TLB: Do you want to talk a little bit about when you were in service, and where you were, and what you did, and what it was like? This can take you awhile; that is fine.

WS: That could be an interview in itself. I have a lot of supporting data that you might want to use sometime. [microphones are checked] I joined the National Guards on
my eighteenth birthday, the Holland Unit Company D 126th Infantry. We were
called into federal service in October of 1940, before Pearl Harbor. We were sent to
Louisiana for training for a year, as was determined by the Department of Defense
and President Roosevelt. October of 1941, would have been the conclusion of our
one year of active duty. Things were heating up in Europe to the degree that our so
called one year was extended. Not too long ago after that, of course, was Pearl
Harbor, and that put an end to our temporary service. So we ended up five years
later, coming home. During that time, our unit of the Michigan National Guard was
sent to the East Coast, Fort Devens, Massachusetts with the understanding that we
were to go to Europe. (Ireland specifically at that time.) But General MacArthur was
ordered from Bataan to Australia. At which point, the President said that there would
be an army for him. Well there was no army, so two divisions were sent to Australia
rather than Europe. One being the 32nd Division, which included the Michigan
National Guard. Instead of going east to Europe, we went west to San Francisco and
boarded a ship that went to Australia. Eventually we went into combat in New
Guinea and the unit eventually ended up in Tokyo three and a half years later.

TLB: What was it like when you returned to Holland after the war?

WS: I don’t think that the city had changed so much; I think that we changed a lot. After
all, at that age when you put in five years you change. Combat and the world
situation at that time matured us rather rapidly. My own personal frustration was to
reacclimate myself to civilian life, after spending so many years in jungles. Most of
the time I recall being petrified - paranoid over such things as stop signs, stop lights,
and traffic. The vehicles we drove were on jungle trails. To come back into this kind of atmosphere was very very strange. And then of course, what are you going to do with you life? It seems strange to me now, but at the time I was about twenty-five years old and considered going to college. But I thought, "College? Four years, I’ll be twenty-nine. My word, how old can you get?" It so happened somebody suggested a type of work that I might get involved in and so I did that. Many went to school. I didn’t. Not at that particular time. That was the most frustrating thing. My dad had died a week before I went over seas. I was the oldest of five kids. I had to make a lot of decisions in a hurry as to what I was going to do with myself.

TLB: Where did you start working?

WS: I started initially with what they called an on-the-job-training program with automobile parts and service. That went in to sales, and then a number of years later I had the opportunity to get into sales of agricultural chemicals. At that time, I started piecing together an education by going to Michigan State University, for example, taking short courses to prepare myself to do the kind of work that I had to do.

TLB: Could you talk about what Holland was like right after World War II and how it is different from today?

WS: After World War II, it was still essentially the same type of community that is was before World War II. It was predominately peopled by people of Dutch extraction, a very high percentage. It was the kind of community where most people knew everyone. Solid, but not expanding at any rapid rate. Predominately controlled,
which is not the right word, but rather influenced by the furniture industry, which had a direct relationship to wages. About that time General Electric came into the community and started changing what I perceive was a "strangle-hold" on the wage structure. Here was competition. Prior to that it was principally the furniture industry and H.J. Heinz.

I presume there was a lot of shifting going on at that time, because many of the local companies, for example Chris-Craft, were making boats for the war department instead of boats for pleasure, there was a change over there. I am aware of some companies in the immediate area, including Grand Rapids, who made parts for airplanes, where that was not their primary reason for being, but they did that temporarily. There were companies in Holland, that were making such things as bearings. Holland Hitch was making trailer hitches for the war effort. Military trucks that sort of business was pretty much structured at that time to meet the war needs, rather than civilian needs.

**TLB:** What are some of the biggest changes that you have seen in Holland, in the last fifty years since that time?

**WS:** Industrial expansion, diversity in terms of types of industry. For example, the office furniture, Haworth, is an organization that grew since that time. Tiara Yachts, or S2 Yachts as I call them, was a brand new company that grew out of a Chris-Craft employee as I think that yesterday’s Sentinel indicated, the honor given to Mr. Slickers. General Electric as I’ve already mentioned was a new company. Some of the companies that developed were companies that supported or reinforced the needs
of the automobile industry. Donnelly, for example, was making products to be used by the automobile industry. I don’t know exactly what Donnelly’s total output was, but I presume that most of it was mirrors which certainly have become much more sophisticated.

The Christmas tree industry grew during that period of time; where its initial concept was to stabilize soil which was marginal, to say the least, in the terms of quality. What was pretty much an erosion prevention, became the Christmas tree industry. The blueberry grew up during that same period, from blow sand to a highly productive crop. Heinz grew substantially and varied their product. Where at one time they were primarily vinegar and pickles, they developed into multiple products. I am sure we could think of some more that we are over looking.

TLB: I am going to jump back a bit. Were there any special problems that were affecting people after the war. Were there things that the city had to deal with or people had to deal with individually?

WS: The biggest problem, as I recall, was shortages. The first car that my wife and I owned...at that time I was in the automobile retail business. If you were to order a new car in 1946, first of all you would be lucky to even get on the list. Because of a shortage of steel the automobiles just hadn’t been made. The back logs were tremendous, as were the back logs on tires, for example. You couldn’t buy new tires unless you had a real need and by need I mean it had to have a direct relationship to doing your work. After the war, cars would eventually start coming through the production line without parts. Our first car was a Hudson 1946; it came without
bumpers. The bumpers came later. Some cars came through without a backseat. It was just the basics. Eventually you would get all your parts and pieces and put your car together. That was rather interesting.

These were the days before the modern snow tire. People still used chains. I remember a salesman coming in one day, and he was selling tire chains. I bought a gross and my boss thought that I was out of my mind. The reason that I bought a gross was that in case we had a lot of snow we could get rid of them in a hurry, because steel was hard to come by. I figured here is a chance to buy. Just as luck would have it, about three weeks after I bought these, we had an incredible snow storm and we got rid of them in a matter of a day or two. So I was brilliant. We could have sat on those chains for two years, who knows?

Sugar was in short supply. There were people who were black-marketing sugar. Getting it from illegal sources and charging illegal prices.

TLB: Even in Holland?

WS: Oh yes.

TLB: Have you been involved in any of the changes that Holland has seen, or how have you reacted to the changes that have gone on in Holland?

WS: That is an interesting question, and I am going to answer it as honestly as I can, because it is going to sound a little bit conceited and arrogant but it is not intended to be. My wife’s brother and I were sitting in a fox hole in New Guinea the day before Thanksgiving 1942, which was the day before my 22nd birthday. He said to me, "When you get back to Holland, what are you going to do?"
I said, "I am going to do two things: one, I am going to buy a sailboat, and two, I want to contribute to that community to the best of my ability." The Chamber of Commerce has this in writing as a statement that I made a number of years ago answering the question, "Why did I join the Chamber?" I loved Holland so much that when I came back it was sort of a missionary zeal with me. It took me twenty years to get the sailboat, but right after World War II, I became involved with the Memorial Day Committee, Tulip Time Board, Tulip Time Parade Committee, Chamber of Commerce Committees, Salvation Army Board, one thing after another. That was my way of making a contribution to the community. During that period of time, I had the privilege of being involved in a lot of the development. Such as, I chaired what was called the Community Betterment Committee at one time. That had to deal with traffic problems and land use and planning and that sort of thing. That was my way of becoming involved. During that period, we observed some major improvements; if you want to look at development as improvement. There are people who have varying opinions on that, whether you should stay the same or develop. I was not involved with, but observed closely such things as what we call the Holland Economic Development Corporation, or HEDCOR. The development of the industrial park on the south east side of the city became the envy of the nation. It became the envy of the state, because there were not a lot of communities who had enough foresight to visualize what was going to be needed. In many communities, as you probably have witnessed, factory is a dirty word. In Holland, factory is a beautiful word, because they really are attractive. I think that is a major, major
accomplishment of this community. I remember listening to a radio or TV program right after the industrial park became a real success. The city of Muskegon was trying to regroup and trying to develop something similar. They really had a difficult time, partially because they depended on basically one or two industries. They just did not have the foresight to diversify and to plan an industrial complex.

Along with that came residential development. You can’t have jobs without people. Therefore people had to live. That is another stage of planning, where properly planned you have good subdivisions so that you have people that enjoy life as families. These become keystones and strength to the community.

TLB: Do you have any idea why people in Holland are so committed to the community? Is there something about the people or is it just a lot of people together that really care about the community?

WS: I think that the word heritage is not quite as meaningful as it has been. I don’t mean to suggest that in order to have good heritage that you have to be Dutch. I do believe that you identify with the community that has an objective or pride. I remember a paragraph in the Military Field Manual which goes something like this, it says, "An individual’s effectiveness to an organization is directly proportionate to his or her feeling of belonging." I think that pretty much answers it. People belong here, they know they belong here. Therefore if you belong in a community you have a vested interest in making it a good community. I really believe in that, that is our strength. That is why I get a little bit upset, quite frankly, with the proliferation of apartment complexes. I realize that apartment complexes serve a purpose, but by nature they
are more transitory. They just do not provide the stability that family stability will provide a community. I watch that with interest, and at this particular point in my life there is not an awful lot that I can do about it. I realize that people have rights, but sometimes I wonder if that is being given a lot of consideration.

TLB: Do you want to talk at all about how agriculture has changed in the Holland area?

WS: Yes, in the field of entomology there is a word that I use quite frequently as applied to your question, and that is "metamorphosis." The community has gone through some "metamorphosis" in terms of agriculture. For example, there was a time when the area immediately south of Kollen Park, which is now a vacant piece of property was at one time the base for the Holland Sugar Company, which no longer exists. Holland Sugar Company provided many local farmers with the opportunity to grow sugar beets as a cash crop. Which then, of course, was harvested and brought to Holland. That was a major agricultural issue. I think that there was a time when a much higher percentage of strawberries were being harvested in this area than there are today, even though there are certainly are some very good sized strawberry fields.

The blueberry industry is probably the one that has been the most successful, most dramatic. In terms of what I already have suggested earlier, the background to the blueberry industry really traces back to the Roosevelt administration, where there had to be better uses for the soils that were doing nothing, particularly on the north side, or in low lands that were moderately wet. The blueberry industry started out with essentially one or two varieties. I don’t know what the count is today, but I am assuming it is somewhere around 20 to 22 varieties of blueberries. It has been an
extremely successful project. The Christmas tree plantations have been, I guess, over the years quite successful. The Zelenka Nurseries on the North-side, is certainly an indication of fabulous success. They are probably close to the second or third largest tax payer in Ottawa County right now. They own that much land, and one of their products is being used as a break through in cancer treatment. It is a by-product of one of the plants that they grow. That, in addition to all the foundation plants that they have been growing over the years, has been an incredible success.

TLB: Do you know the name of the plant?
WS: Tax...Taxus....it will probably come to me while we are talking.
TLB: Okay, well if you think of it. If not I can always see if I can find out where that is.
WS: I'm sure if you call the pharmacist they would have the answer quick like. It is a by-product. It is extracted from one of the...I think that it is a Yew plant. It is a by-product that has recently been discovered. [The actual name is Taxol as confirmed by a World Wide Web article on chemotherapy and cancer treatment.] That could have a major impact on the local area.

Beyond that, since I did spend thirteen years in the agricultural chemical business, I have observed some of the changes over the years. I guess probably one of the major changes was that there was a time when Zeeland was called the "Chick Capital." The reason for Zeeland Chicks as a logo for the high school, was because there was a time when Zeeland and Holland were just inundated with hatcheries. This city, itself, had somewhere around probably eight to ten hatcheries. Zeeland had hatcheries all over the place. The poultry business was big business and it still is big
business in a different form. Today, you don’t have that many hatcheries in this area, but you have things such as Bill Mar Farms, the turkey farms, and there are some pretty large chicken operation in the Hamilton area. I think pretty much the Hamilton area. There have been some changes there. It is a lot like the gasoline stations and the grocery store business. There was a time when neighborhoods where loaded with grocery stores and corner gas stations, but over the years what has happened is that the big get bigger and the small get out. That is the same thing in agriculture. You either are huge or you aren’t in it. You just can’t be competitive. That is the major change.

TLB: Has the increase of industry in Holland affected the agriculture business?

WS: I don’t know if there has been any correlation between local industry, other that H.J. Heinz and agriculture. Unless it is farm equipment. Big Dutchman Poultry company which was born and brought up in Zeeland, eventually was sold. It was designed primarily as an automatic poultry feeding business. That got to be a world wide business. There was a direct relationship to national agriculture, not necessarily just local agriculture. There are also two transplanter manufacturing companies in the area.

TLB: In the time that you lived in Holland, before the War and then afterward, have there been any controversies that have stood out that you remember?

WS: Before and after?

TLB: Before or after.

WS: Well let’s see. I guess that the Civic Center was built after. There would be
controversy right there. There was a councilman who fought vehemently to support the concept of a Civic Center and there were those who just didn’t want any part of it. And there were those who just didn’t want any part of it in its present location; the reason being that there was sort of an unstable base in terms of the soil structures there. They figured that it would never work. I just noticed in this morning’s paper, that the Catholic Church (St. Frances DeSalles) is having problems or may have problems reconstructing, because they found that some soil borings there were indicated unstable soil. That is the same soil from the same vein that the Holland Civic Center was built on. There was at one time, in the early days of this city, a number of valleys and creeks coming in from the south to Lake Macatawa. They were sort of bulldozed, closed up, and homes where built on them. I can show you homes in the area of the Catholic Church where if you look at the sidewalls they are actually caving in and the reason being that they were built on this creek. The Civic Center was a very controversial issue at that time, but eventually Mr. Kalkman won and the Civic Center was built.

Any time there is any significant change of direction or new innovation, certainly there are those who are for it and there are those who are against. It is pretty difficult to have anything major without different views. During the period of time that I was Mayor, I strongly believed, and I still believe that this community needs a marina. But it was controversial. There was some people who didn’t agree with me and said it was only for rich people. Other people said that it was going to create too much noise and traffic on the West side of the city. It was controversial.
and whenever you have a controversy the difficulty is trying to separate the emotion from the fact. That is a problem that I run into.

The major difference in this community during the years since World War II, particularly since World War II or the last fifty years, is the ethnic balance. And it is not a secret that it takes a little while for different cultures to adjust to each other. That is an ongoing thing. I have to personally believe that the fact that we have recently been considered an "All-America City" indicates that we have enough intelligence in this community to try to meet that challenge and eliminate controversy and enhance communication.

I can't think of anything devastating in terms of controversy. The 31 corridor issue is still stalling, because there are people who have varying opinions. I remember the days when there was no such thing as a bypass around Holland. All the traffic came down through South Washington, and down River Avenue. People at that time said that they didn't want a bypass around the city because then they would lose all their business. Can you imagine what would happen if all that traffic came down River Avenue today?

TLB: I would never be able to get to Herrick Library!

WS: That is right. [laughter] On the other hand, when do you stop making bypasses, passing bypasses? Limited access works. So any time there is a visionary who has long range ideas there are people who are going to say that you are out of your mind. The question is, who is the wiser?

This is something worth looking into. When I first went into the real estate
business, I took a course at the University of Michigan. One of the very first things that I learned was to try to forecast what a community is going to be like. It is like throwing a stone into a pond. As the waves get further out the separation between the waves gets larger. They had a map of Detroit and they had core center right downtown and they had circles on that map in ten year increments. It was really interesting to see how much the city grew every ten years. If you start at Eighth Street and River Avenue, for example, and you start making circles around Eighth Street and River Avenue in ten year increments, and I haven't gone that far, but I have done it in general. When I graduated from High School, one of my classmates was a girl by the name of Alice Bouwman. She lived on 27th Street; she lived out in the country. 27th street, her street, wasn't paved. My grandfather and my grandmother lived out where the Prince Plant is out on Blue Star Highway now, across from the airport. That is where my mother was born. That was way out in the country! [laughter] My grand-dad would take all day to just get his horses hooked up to the wagon and come down to the Holland Co-op and back. That was a day's work. Now I can be there in five minutes. I got you off the track, but I just had to share that with you, because it is really interesting. If you try to look ahead ten years, how big is that circle going to get.

TLB: And where are we going to go?

WS: Yes, where are we going to go? And what kind of controls are we going to have to impose in order to control it, if we want to control it? And if we don't want to control it then it is helter-skelter. I went to a meeting in Laketown township not to
long ago, and there were some people there who were a little bit disturbed about the rate of growth and things and that were happening in Laketown township. One of the people said that the reason that we moved out here is because... In effect what they wanted to say is that we are here now and we are comfortable, so don't let anybody else come. As a politician, it is very difficult for people like myself to say it the way it is, because right away you are going to make somebody angry. The attitude toward development is proportionate to which side you are on. If you have owned a farm all your life, and you are near retirement age and someone comes along and offers you $10,000 an acre; you say to your wife, "Honey we can retire and we can buy ourselves a nice condo and we can travel, let's sell the farm." If you happen to own that farm and you don't want anybody else around, you are going to say, "Keep your people out of here." How do you plan if you are in politics, whose side are you on. I think it is an inherent right for people to benefit from there own investment if that is the reason that they purchased. How are you going to say to someone that they have no right to make a profit? That is a tough call.

TLB: And how do you tell somebody that they can't move into a city too?

WS: Exactly.

TLB: What are some reasons why you think the city keeps growing the way it does?

WS: That is a very interesting question and it is the nuts and bolts of what goes on in the community. I happen to be on the Allegan County Commission; I am on a number of committees, including the Planning Commission. The question is whether you want to grow or whether you don't. Stagnation is one thing. Status quo is another. And
development is another. Some people feel as though development is a dirty word. And maybe it is. I must confess that there are times when we are travelling and we get into a little community that really hasn’t changed in the last thirty years, "I think that this is kind of cozy." If that is what you like, then that’s the way it is.

To answer your question, I think that one of the strengths of this community is diversification of industry. There are communities where their success and failure is directly proportionate to the industry that controls the environment. If that industry happens to be suffering, then whole community suffers. In our case, there have not been very many times in my memory, except for the horrible depression we went through in the late 1920s. Except for that period of time Holland really hasn’t had a depression. There have been times, when the country as a whole has had recessions. And there have been times when Holland itself has had mild recessions. But nothing on the scale of the rest of the nation. Unemployment has never been as bad as it has been in some of the other areas of the country. I guess that is the reason, it is just good balance. If you think of the types of industry we have got here, I think we are the envy of the state. Nice types of industry which attract nice types of people. Nothing that is offensive in terms of smoke and fumes and that sort of thing. It is very, very, very well thought out and don’t think for a minute that that just accidentally happened. There are people that have exercised wise control over who comes and who doesn’t.

TLB: In the terms of industry.

WS: Exactly.
TLB: Well speaking of qualities of Holland what are some of other qualities that seem to stand out in the city of Holland?

WS: Well, certainly Tulip Time is an asset, though some people have a "ba-hum bug" attitude towards Tulip Time, but let's face it, as I said earlier in our conversation, something about the feeling of belonging, you really have to be a pretty negative individual not to be influenced by the beauty of Tulip Time. The beauty of the area. I talk about this a lot with my wife. I said, "Here it is almost Labor Day and the last few years we finally made a point to spend as much time as we can just having a little picnic lunch at Ottawa Beach." For example, because it occurred to us a few years ago that we drive all the way to Florida in the winter time to spend a week or two down there and are very happy to go sit on a beach and here we've got one within a matter of minutes. There are summers that go by and we say, "Hey, we haven't even taken advantage of it."

I spent twenty-five years in the real estate business. My personal approach to trying to help people find a home in the city was to take them on a tour. First of all I would ask them questions, like what are your likes and dislikes. I would ask them if they have any religious preferences, because if they are Catholic they ought to be somewhere in the range of a Catholic church particularly if they have children. And vice-a-versa, if they are public school oriented. Find out what their interests are, find out what their hobbies are, and find out that sort of thing. Then I would put them in a car and I would start out at what was then Point West. I would drive all the way around the city and hit every subdivision. I would take them through the school
districts; I would show them the schools. I would show them the churches. I would show them our shopping areas. I would then end up at the State Park, a complete trip around the lake. I would take them to Kollen Park, there is one we just take for granted. You would be amazed at the number of people who said, "What a beautiful city! What a beautiful park!" And then you would get to Ottawa Beach, particularly people that had never been in the mid-west before, they would be awestruck that you couldn't look across lake Michigan. We take these things for granted. All you have to do is go out there and watch. It is just beautiful. I don't go there to covet, and I am not envious. Sure I would love to have a forty foot sailboat someday, but I get a thrill out of just seeing one.

TLB: Are there any negative aspects to Holland, or any drawbacks to living here?

WS: That depends on the individual point of view. There are people who say we are getting too big and too busy. That came with the development, and that is just something that we have to live with. That simply challenges us to plan properly, so that we can live with our growth. No, I can't think of any, I really can't.

TLB: Do you want to talk a little bit more about your life, maybe some of the things that you did when you were the Mayor, when you were Mayor?

WS: Well, I don't know what other questions you have, after we answer that question, but maybe you would like to know how it happened that I became Mayor. That might be a little bit more interesting. To me it was interesting.

TLB: Okay.

WS: There are people who were in combat, or who were in a violent storm and they get
religious all of a sudden. They say, "Lord, if you'll save me I'll do this and I'll do that." Well my commitment to the community wasn't quite like that, but my experience in the Pacific and in combat made me appreciate the city. So I came back to the city with almost a religious zeal. As I indicated, first thing you know I am involved. The Governor called me up and asked me if I would reorganize the local Holland National Guard Unit. I thought that was quite a thrill, because I had left as a Private and here I came back commanding as a Captain, or a Company Commander. That is an honor in itself. In a community such as Holland, that sort of thing propels you right into the limelight. First thing you know, I am on the Memorial Day Committee. Then chairing the Memorial Day Committee. That kind of thing propelled me into the Tulip Time activities. And the first thing you know, I am chairing Tulip Time Parades on Saturday for a couple years in a row. I became involved in the Chamber of Commerce and was either a participant of or chaired committee, which gave me an opportunity to observe what was going on in the community. Like the North River Avenue Study Committee, or the East 16th Street Study Committee in '70 and '71. Now look what is happening, exactly what we predicted way back in 1971, when we made a statement, which went something like this, "Let's make sure that East 16th Street provides the beautiful opportunity to enter and leave the city. Let's not have another 28th Street, Grand Rapids. If we can let's buy enough property to have us a boulevard." That is exactly what is going to happen and I am so thrilled. The ramps on Lakewood and 31. Again I chaired the North River Bridge Committee and people said that we needed an eight lane bridge.
And I said, "For what?" The problem is, what happens to people when they get off the bridge? Because of my military background, I went and got a map out one night and I started drawing arrows. The Military Field Manual talks about likely avenues of approach and that means, "How do you attack the enemy, or how does the enemy attack you?" You have to know the bridge structure and you have to know the road structures. All of a sudden it occurred to me that 31 crosses Lakewood, but there were no ramps. I thought that people who were driving from the Industrial Park, if they wanted to get to the North side. All you had to do is ramp them down from US-31 to Lakewood and they wouldn't even have to come through the city. That suggestion was made to the Michigan Department of Transportation and they bought the idea. The thing that shocked me was that they said, "Don't be surprised if it takes fifteen years before it happens." It took fifteen years. That sort of thing really peaked my curiosity. That is why I am so fascinated with this 31 project, because once they do decide on something major, in fifteen years we will be lucky to see it.

[flips tape]

During my years in the National Guard, I also ended up commanding a Battalion. That Battalion was called to active duty for the Detroit Riots. As you might expect, after the Detroit Riots when I came home all the service clubs asked me to speak on that subject. Needless to say, it was a rather interesting source of conversation. It was so unusual. While I was doing that, I was trying to evaluate the clubs, because I had made up my mind that I was going to join a service club. I wanted to do my own picking and choosing. And without explaining why I made the
decision, I ended up with the Kiwanis Organization. I became involved very deeply with the organization. And because of the commitment I made overseas, again, I became involved with the Salvation Army Advisory Board, way back in 1952. They made me a life member. With the combination of Salvation Army and Kiwanis, some of the same people who were on the Kiwanis Board were also on the Salvation Army Board. One night, unbeknown to me, I walked into the Kiwanis Club and the guys said, "You're running for Mayor."

And I said, "What?"

They said, "You're running for Mayor."

I said, "You have got to be kidding."

They said, "No, we are not kidding."

They had the petitions all signed. Everything was all signed and ready to go. I got thinking about it and I thought, "Well here all these years I have been involved in community activities and it makes sense. It does make sense." So I thought, "Well okay, I'll go for it." And so I won. That gave me four years of direct involvement in some of the activities going on in the community.

TLB: Did you say what year that was?

WS: I was elected initially in 1983 and then to 1987. I guess that was a highlight in my wife's life and my life. There something really wonderful about public office, contrary to the cynical approach that some people take toward politicians, if you want to use the miserable word "politicians." I don't like that word; I understand "politics," but I don't like the word, "politicians." We met some wonderful people,
just absolutely wonderful people, not only throughout the state of Michigan, but throughout the United States. We had the privilege of meeting some governors. We had the privilege of meeting the Vice-President and Mrs. of the United States (George Bush), and the ambassadors of the Netherlands. We escorted he and his wife all around the Holland area and showed them all the little Dutch Villages, and had some wonderful times. And we had some great Mayor's exchanges, and certainly enjoyed some real development in this community that I am proud of.

TLB: Were there any projects that you worked on as the Mayor, that really stand out? Or any task that you did?

WS: Well it isn't the case of what I did; it is a case of what we did. For example, we were one of the first seven cities in Michigan to be accepted in the Mainstreet Project. That was the beginning of what you see downtown. I'm not suggesting that it was because of me that happened that nicely. If it hadn't been for those who followed me and Ed Prince, certainly, we would never have been able to pull off as much of what was accomplished. That was the beginning. That is the interesting part of it. That was the beginning and I think that we became a role model for a lot of communities, as an indirect result. If it hadn't been for the Padnos family, the Padnos transportation center would not have evolved. The City Manager and I spent a whole day in Baltimore, Maryland arm wrestling with the CSX just trying to knock the price down on that property so that it became reasonable. That particular day we managed to trim off one hundred thousand dollars. I'm pretty proud of that.

Evergreen Commons, that came to fruition, again, not out of my doing, but during
my administration. The Tulip City Airport came into being at the final stages, again, not of my doing, but I was fortunate enough to be around at that time. Dr. VanWylen, who was then president of Hope College and members of the Tulip City Airport Advisory Committee flew to Washington and made a presentation to the Federal Aviation Authority and made our final pitch and we ended up getting our final grant, which gave final approval to Tulip City Airport. I was lucky enough to be around during the dedication; that was a major event.

The enhancement of the hard surface paths in Centennial Park. During that period of time, that monument on the west side of the park was dedicated to Veterans. I thought, "Isn't that ludicrous. Here they are dedicating a nice monument to Veterans and all they have is gravel roads and gravel drives. A handicapped Veteran can't even get in to see his own memorial." So I simply suggested that I for one would like to see some hard surface paths. I quite frankly was thinking blacktop. That I figured was the most economical, but it certainly made sense. The Holland Historical group didn't happen to agree with that. They said, "The hard surface part is fine, but we've got to make it prettier than that." So that developed. [phone rings] The Buy a Brick Campaign began in Centennial Park which ultimately ended up with new lighting and the brick walks.

TLB: I think that I remember reading about that.

WS: One other item that just occurred to me that I was involved in, in its infancy not in its completion, because unfortunately I lost that election, was the transition of the post office to the museum. Because of my military affiliation and my friends in Lansing, I
managed to get their blessings and they backed off from having first access to the post office building. So they backed off and gave us a free opportunity to acquire it for the community, which it was eventually used as the museum. I guess that is pretty much it.

TLB: I am trying to figure out if your National Guard Unit, I was talking to Mr. L.C. Dalman, I am not sure if you know who he is?

WS: Yes, I do.

TLB: He was talking about a National Guard Unit from Michigan, from this area, who one minute they were in San Francisco, in California, then they were in Australia, and then they were in combat. Is that the same one?

WS: That was us.

TLB: He said that it was just amazing, because people at home didn't know what was going on with the unit.

WS: In the early days during World War II, there was such thing as, obviously, military secrecy. A lot of things were kept quiet to the point where people at home didn't have the foggiest idea where we were. And we were not allowed to tell them. "Somewhere in the Pacific," that was the answer. We went from San Francisco to South Australia, initially, and did some retraining there. We went from there to New Guinea and that was a rough campaign. That was a primitive campaign. That was a long campaign. Yes, that was the Holland Unit. That was where a lot of that stuff came from. *(Did this mission lose a lot of men?)* [Twelve from Holland were killed in out first battle, many more were wounded or suffered from malaria,
jaundice, malnutrition, and a host of jungle diseases, including yours truly.]

TLB: Was there some surprise when you returned with the people, when it all came out where you had been? Or did it come out before you returned?

WS: It came out before we returned. The specifics didn't necessarily come out, but as newspapers wouldn't say the name of the unit, but they would say that the Holland National Guard was in combat in New Guinea. "Where in New Guinea?" That is the way it was throughout the war. I was blessed when my now-brother-in-law and I were commissioned lieutenants the same day. One of the requirements of the duties of the officer were to censor mail. So if your boyfriend writes you a letter I have to censor it. The reason I have to censor it is I have to find out if he is giving away information that he shouldn't be giving away. It is a rather impersonal job, but somebody has to do it. I used to be amazed at the ingenuity of these guys trying to figure out some devious way to tell someone where they were. I will never forget: one of the envelopes that we were issued had a logo in the upper left hand corner of Australia, these guys would take their pen and put a big dot there right where they were. [laughter]

TLB: So did you just take a black marker to it.

WS: Yes, or sometimes cut out the items that were secret.

TLB: Could you tell me what Holland was like during the Vietnam War, and how the community reacted to that?

WS: I think that the community reacted like the nation reacted. There was never a strong indication that congress or the American people, the Department of Defense, maybe,
were really in favor of the war. There never seemed to be a resolution to do as we were accustomed to doing, which was to win it and get out. Initially, I think that as a sense of loyalty people were supportive, as time went by it became very obvious that it was a political war. It split families. It split the country. In my particular case, with my Red, White, and Blue patriotic attitude toward the world, at that time I was a Lieutenant Colonel with the Michigan National Guards. I had gone to Command and General Staff College, at Fort Leavonworth, Kansas and studied that stuff. My instructors were officers who had been there, and who were involved. On my National Guard staff, I had regular Army officers that had been there. Needless to say, if I was going to be any good at all, I asked a lot of questions. "How come this? and "How come that?" I kept getting the answers that confused me more than anything else. Now here I am, a person who had good military knowledge, so I could about imagine people who didn’t have that knowledge just couldn’t understand what was going on.

I remember walking down Eighth Street in Holland here, when I met a full Colonel, in uniform. He was Deputy Public Information Officer on General West Moorland’s staff. He had all kinds ribbons on. I introduced myself, as a National Guard Colonel, and I said, "Have you got time for a cup of coffee?" And he said, "Yes." We went into a restaurant downtown. And I can’t talk military without drawing maps and so I drew a map. I said, "Why doesn’t the commanding general, West Moorland, do this?" I remember drawing an arrow between Hanoi and Hi Fong. I said, "Why don’t you make an invasion like MacArthur did at Inchon, and
sever the Ho Chi Man Trail and win that war." "Why do you keep taking those hills, and losing 2,500-3,000 troops, give up the hill and then take it another year later, and lose another 2,500? It doesn't make any sense to me, whatsoever."

And he said to me, "Bill, there isn't a general in Vietnam that would disagree with you, however, Elsworth Bunker, the Secretary of State, tells us what we may do and what we may not."

So then I asked the question, "What is the mission?"

The answer was, "A war of containment."

That is enough to make you fry. Up until that point I had been supportive, then came the Tete Offensive. The south Vietnamese were told what was going to happen. They were told that there was going to be an invasion from the north. They went about their holiday, and paid no attention. Our American troops were getting killed, defending them. Right about then I lost it; I had absolutely no sympathy for it whatsoever. I don't know what your personal politics are, they say that the military should not get involved in national politics. Well, whether it is factual or whether it is not factual. I am not trying to be redundant, but one of the things that I do is that whenever there is a book sale at the Civic Center I get over there and I dig for military history, because I just devour the stuff. Particularly since I have been at Command and General Staff College. I look at these things from a different perspective, from a tactical, strategical, political perspective. One of the books that I came out of there with was the "Accidental President". Here it is going to sound very political, but it pertains to President Johnson being quoted as saying that he sent
550,000 troops to Vietnam to stimulate the economy. Anytime you stimulate the economy with bodies that is something that I just can not tolerate. That is a very indirect answer to how that affected Holland. Holland, like the rest of the nation, was totally confused and frustrated, and demoralized. And I would say maybe Holland more than a lot of other communities, in that the Holland Area by nature and by tradition knows right from wrong. They certainly knew that Communism was wrong, but they didn't feel our approach to solving the situation was right in Vietnam. At anytime anyone who has any military experience goes into a situation, or is placed into a situation without a will to win, that is inexcusable. When I think of the tons and tons of bombs that were dropped in Vietnam and how little was accomplished with that as compared to how much we accomplished with so much less in the Pacific. It just boggles my mind.

TLB: It doesn't make sense. Can you explain a major turning point you have had in your life?

WS: My life?

TLB: We kind of jump around from your life to Holland to your life.

WS: Well, yes. Try to imagine being in combat and in the service, whether you are male or female, in those days it was male, in these days it is male and female; try to imagine being twenty-one years old and having the lives of fifty people your direct responsibility. Try to imagine how it feels if one of them gets killed, or two, or three, or four, or five. That is an awesome responsibility. Just as a Lieutenant. Can you imagine what it is like to be a General MacArthur or Admiral Nimitz or any
division commander. When the casualty reports come in, in the morning by the hundreds, can you imagine what that is like? As I look back now, here we are looking at or wedding picture, which was in '46, I had five years of service and three and half years over seas when that picture was taken; I still look like a kid.

TLB: You do!

WS: Yes, I really do. Now can you imagine what it was like being that much younger, with that kind of responsibility? I was twenty-three years old and I commanded a company! That is about ninety men. That was an awesome responsibility. No wonder we grew up as fast as we did. We really matured. The question was, "What had impact on our life?" That had to be it. We really grew up in a hurry.

TLB: Definitely.

WS: One of the unusual aspects of my military career is the fact that my brother-in-law, and I, and my cousin, the other Bill Sikkel, all three of us on the same day in the Pacific received a direct appointment to Second Lieutenants. We didn’t go to OCS, we were Sergeants in the morning, Lieutenants at night, which is rare, very rare. In fact, there were only twelve of us out of about 15,000. It just happened to be two Bill Sikkels and the guy who became my brother-in-law, who graduated from Holland Christian with me. We just happened to be three out of the twelve. Therefore all of my peers where college graduates, some of them West Point graduates, all older than me by at least four years. Here I am a kid with equal amount of responsibility and equal rank. Which put me in a very difficult situation, because I had to use my intellect competing with people that had much more education. I remember one of
the older officers saying to me, "Why are you always so damn serious?" And I said, "Because this is serious business." At twenty-one years old this is serious business, and it was serious business. Unfortunately I kept that facade for many, many years until I finally developed a sense of humor and I am glad that I did. I wish I had developed it a lot earlier. At that particular point, I had awesome responsibilities.

TLB: This is kind of getting back to Holland. Are you involved with the church at all? What is your impression of how the church interacts with the Holland community as compared to other cities?

WS: Well again as I said in my opening comments, there is a difference between objectively answering the questions and being an egotist or arrogant. Yes, I have been involved with the church ever since day one. Since World War II, I have been a Sunday school teacher, a Sunday School superintendent, I have been a Deacon, and I am currently an elder.

And there is a sidelight there if you pardon me, because I think it’s fascinating. When I was superintendent of Sunday school, one of my neighbors was a friend of some Japanese students at Reformed Bible College in Grand Rapids. They would come to visit frequently. One of my class-mates at Command and General Staff College was a Japanese Colonel that I had fought against, believe it or not in New Guinea, and here he and I got to be friends. He came to Holland to visit with me and my wife. We were two doors away from these people who befriended these Japanese students. They were Protestants, having worked with missionaries in Tokyo. My Japanese Colonel friend was a Buddhist, and would you believe his
headquarters was right across the street from the missionary station in Tokyo that these four guys came from? They all ended up in the backyard, and he stayed with us. That was an experience!

And then I had these Japanese students in our church and for Sunday school. They asked, "How can you, having fought those guys, even invite them to our church?" I said, "The war is history, we have to forgive and forget." They just could not understand how it could be that way, but that is the way that I feel. What good is bitterness?

TLB: Does it stand out at all how Holland has the church interact with the community so much in Holland? Do you see that as a difference in other communities?

WS: That is a very tough question to answer and it is a very general question to answer in that the word community is so different. For example, a friend of mine, my brother-in-law's former minister, who has since died, wrote a book. The book was entitled, *Put Your Arms Around the City*. Would you believe, that I received the last copy that he happened to have in his garage when I went to visit him while we were in California? The reason that I wanted that book was the fact that I was Mayor at that time. I was trying to look at it from a spiritual perspective, "Put Your Arms Around the City." What I was trying to get a sense of was, "How can we get churches to work together so that we can communicate with people and solve each others needs?"

In that particular case he is talking Los Angeles, now that is a big chore. Holland, Michigan is "doable." A church's impact on a community, in a situation like Holland is quite "doable." It is very difficult in a totally different area, like Detroit, or
Chicago. Even then if you want to get into theology as it relates to government, as recent as last Sunday our minister had a sermon on exactly that subject. That subject being the percentage of people that are not approached by the church. So there is an awful lot of work that needs to be done by the church. Now I don’t want to say that I am an advocate for mixing church and state. What I am an advocate of is that if we know the difference between right and wrong, then those of us who feel as though we know what right is, have the responsibility of conveying that knowledge to people who probably don’t understand, so that we can solve our social problems without conflict.

TLB: What do you make of the increasing diversification of ethnic cultures in the Holland community, and how do you think the Dutch heritage still plays in the community today?

WS: Industry has created the diversity, by virtue of the fact that in order to get the job done you have to have people. If there don’t happen to be enough Dutch people around, then you have to go out and get someone else. That is what has happened. And it has created some difficulty in that there are people that probably haven’t been exposed to the rest of the world, like some of us Veterans have, for example, and then they find out that there are people who aren’t Dutch. Some of these people find it difficult to absorb or appreciate other cultures. They sort of have the attitude that if you don’t have our ethnic background, then you can’t be any good. If I may give you the benefit of some of my own ethnic background. Years ago, way back when the road where my mother was born ever became Blue Star Highway, it was US-31,
and before it was US-31, it was a gravel road. When I was a teenager, it was still a
gravel road. It became US-31 right about that time. I remember, every once and
awhile people would have car trouble. I remember the first time I saw a black family
drive onto my grandparents’s property. He wanted to use the telephone, because he
had car trouble. I remember the look on my grandmother’s face. She was absolutely
petrified, because that had never happened to her before. I remember not too long
after that, where another family had car trouble and the people came over to use the
phone. I remember her asking them this question, "Are you American, or are you
one of us?" Which meant, "Are you American or are you Dutch?" That was
something that some people had a very difficult time living with, and are still having
trouble living with. I guess the ideal is, and I don’t know if I am answering the
question completely, but the ideal that there is a tremendous amount of advantage of
the cultural heritage that this community has had, but there is no reason why we can’t
marry that to some of the strong cultural heritage that have come to Holland, and add
the two.

There are some people who feel, and I am talking about those who have come
here since we have been here long ago; some feel that we should do away with Tulip
Time, because it is no longer Dutch town. I don’t happen to agree with that, because
one of the experiences I had as Mayor was to go to the National League of Cities
meeting in San Antonio. I remember that my visual image of San Antonio was
predicated on the Alamo. I remember that one of the first things that I did when we
had some free time was to go to the Alamo. I would no more consider San Antonio,
without understanding the Hispanic influence on that town, than I would the Catholic monasteries and missions along the coast of California and its relationships to the California cities. That is America! Therefore, why should we be bashful about the fact that Holland, Michigan was essentially a Dutch community that developed?

There is nothing wrong with that. We shouldn't have to be apologetic about that. We should simply use that as a basis for something like a flower that is opening up. It just has more color, that's all.

TLB: And tulips grow nicely here, too.

WS: Of course.

TLB: I have a few more questions and then we can look at photos. Can you tell me what you have heard other people say about Holland, if you have friends and family that live outside of Holland that come and visit? What are their reactions to the community?

WS: You mean those who may have been here before and than have come back to revisit? They can't believe the changes that have taken place. They're lost. They are absolutely lost. That is one of the first things. They can't believe the changes. The second thing is. I don't know why this is true, it doesn't seem to bother me all that much, but people say that you have the craziest drivers in Holland, Michigan. I guess it is a matter of what you are used to. If you get on the Dan Ryan Freeway in Chicago you either stay in your lane or get killed. Over here, it is amazing how some people do drive. The biggest thing is that people can't believe how much we've grown.
TLB: When you meet people that are new to the community, what kind of reactions do you get?

WS: I have had nothing, but positive. One of the joys I've had, involved one of my objectives as Mayor. That is to have the Michigan Mayor's Conference in Holland, because I am walking Chamber of Commerce. I just love the city, and I will sell it every chance I get. I remember sitting in Planning Commission in the City Hall here, Dick Den Uyl came in and was asking for permission to construct the Holiday Inn. So it got through Planning Commission and then the issue was referred to the Council. Council approved it. After the approval, I didn't want to cloud the issue, I said, "Mr. Den Uyl, may I make a request?"

He said, "What's that?"

I said, "May I be the first to reserve a convention for your new hotel?"

He said, "Who?"

And I said, "The Michigan Mayors Association."

He said, "When?"

And I said, "August of '85 or there abouts."

He said, "Fine."

Then I go to Ann Arbor to a board meeting of the Michigan Mayors Association. I said, "I would like to invite you to Holland, for next year's convention."

They said, "Where is it going to be?"

I said, "The Holiday Inn."

They said, "Where is that?"
And I said, "It isn’t."

Then they said, "When is it going to be finished?"

I said, "The best estimate is April, and our convention is going to be in August."

They agreed to reservations to a hotel that hadn’t been built yet. I really got a big charge out of that.

TLB: Of course, it was up by the time that you needed it.

WS: It was up and to answer your question, it is a joy to observe people when they come back to the hotel and say, "What a beautiful city you have got. What a beautiful downtown you’ve got. What a beautiful state park you have got." Then again you also have Windmill Island. People are just blown away; some of these people just couldn’t believe how beautiful it was. Lots of fun.

TLB: You can comment on this if you want, if not you don’t have to. Concentrating on Holland, how do you think the role of women has changed since World War II?

WS: The role of women. How much time have you got? Since when?

TLB: Since World War II.

WS: World War II, as history will indicate, was a time in history where out of necessity women had to work in plants, because the men were gone. That may or may not have been the forecaster of the role of women from then on. Logically it would follow that if they could do it then, then why can’t they do it now? Up until that time, it is no secret, that the role of women was primarily to be mothers. That was first priority. That doesn’t necessarily suggest that no women worked, but women
generally, in those days, there was a one parent income and for the most part mothers didn’t go to work until the kids were grown up or if they were professionals. There were teachers back then who were married, and did have children, but still taught. There were professionals in other professions who were married and still worked. But by and large mothers, stayed home to take care of their kids. That had a major change on our society, in my judgement. I am not going to be judgmental about it. In our particular case, as soon as we had our first child, my wife, who had worked for Michigan Bell Telephone, was frequently getting phone calls begging her to come back. My answer was, "Over my dead body!" My answer was, "I’ll get two jobs to keep us going, but you are going to take care of the kids." And she agreed. There wasn’t any argument about it. She felt that was her primary responsibility. As time went by, finally when our youngest was about sixteen, there was need for some help in the hospital and there was some friends that wanted her to work at the hospital. And so she did go to work at the hospital. Even then, our sixteen year old would come home and ask, "Mom, are you working tomorrow?" That was our particular approach.

I realize that things have changed drastically in terms of people’s lifestyles. For example, when we were first married, I don’t know how many years it was before we had a dishwasher. And admittedly, we lived in an era when these things came to be acceptable. I remember arguing with my wife and saying, "Honey, it is time to get a clothes dryer." And she would say, "I like to hang out the clothes." I would say, "I realize that, but you know in the winter time and all that stuff."
Finally I convinced her to get a clothes dryer. We had a single stall garage and we had one car and all that kind of stuff. Today a lot of kids want a two stall garage, and they want a bath and a half and they want a family room, and they want two cars, and all this stuff when they get married. There is only one way you can do that and that is for both to work. The question is: priorities? Again that is a judgement thing.

But it has had a bearing on a number of factors. When I read, for example, that the unemployment statistics are let's just say six percent I say, "Based on what?" If you base it on post World War II, when principally the fathers were working, and some mothers, then six percent would have been major. But when you add husband and wife together as a work force, then six percent is not nearly as significant as six percent would be (if it were just husbands.)

I only have one concern. It is anybody's right to live their life anyway they want to. I have one social concern. Well, I have more than one; I have two concerns. One concern is that it pains me, as a person who has been in the real estate business to see what I call latch-key kids, or kids coming home with no parent around. That just really bothers me, because that is the moral guts of our community and our world. And the other thing is the divorce ratio. That just bothers me to no end. And again, all these issues are judgmental issues. I applaud Jesse Dalman for the position that she is taking, to make people understand that marriage is serious business. I am not suggesting that people should stay married all their life. If circumstances are such that they shouldn't, they are better off separating. I could cite
many examples of that. But on the other hand, this business of let’s try marriage for awhile and see how it goes. That is for the birds! I can talk, I am an authority. My brother and his wife were married a week ahead of us, and they celebrated their fiftieth. We celebrated our fiftieth. My cousins on his 53rd or 54th year. I am proud of that; I really am. There probably were times when we could have thrown in the towel and said, "Bag it!" But that is not what we got married for. As a result, and here I am up on my "soap box", I think and I am so thankful for this we have got the most blessed family. We have three of the nicest kids; we have six of the nicest grandchildren. It is an absolute joy to get together. When I think about that as compared to what some dysfunctional families are, I just cringe to think of the hardships that they go through. We could have had some bad apples too, but I have to think that maybe, just maybe, we did a few things right.

TLB: Big families are fun to be a part of too.

WS: Yes. If you were to go to this book right here. This is our fiftieth anniversary book. If you were just to read what the grandchildren have got to say in there... We lost two children at birth, we actually would have had five. One was strangulation at delivery, and the other one we just couldn’t get to breathe. [looking through photo albums that show mostly family history] Pantland Hotel is now the Amway Grand. Our first night for our honeymoon cost us six dollars and forty-five cents.

TLB: It would probably be 100 times that now.

WS: We seriously considered sending them a letter, stating that we were going to celebrate our 50th anniversary, photocopy the copy of this, and I’m not suggesting that we
were looking for a freebie, but they could really do some PR on that one.

TLB: It is probably at least $64.50, if not more.

WS: Yes, I don’t think you could go for less than I figure closer to $100.

TLB: Definitely.

WS: This telegram here is another one that will blow your socks. My wife was a telephone operator at the time. We thought that we had kept our destination a top secret, but somehow or another those telephone operators found out that we had reservations at the Pantland. When we got there, there was a telegram waiting for us.

This unit [points at picture] it still in existence. When you read about the brigade or when you read about the Holland National Guard Unit, they are part of this Battalion. They are going to be putting in their summer training at the Olympics, believe it our not. That is going to be their assignment this year, security at the Olympics.

TLB: My ex-boyfriend from High School is going to Atlanta with the National Guard.

WS: I ended up my career at the Michigan Military Academy at Fort Custer. I am on the faculty over there. That [referring to a picture] was actually my final day of duty over their. My official retirement took place at the Adjutant General’s office in Lansing.

TLB: What year was that?


You have probably heard of the Image Group? It is owned by this [points] son-in-law right here.
TLB: What do they do, exactly?

WS: They are the ones who put together the composite for the "All-America City" presentation, Mainstreet. He does all the promotional stuff for the Prince corporation, Russ's restaurants, Donnelly mirrors. [new tape]

TLB: Is there anything that you would like to add about Holland?

WS: I think that we have covered a pretty good area. Friends of mine have said, "You've been involved in so much, why don't you write a book?" Well, it might be interesting for a limited number of people, but really what I think of is the modern cliche, that "it has been a ride." [laughter] It really has. There have been some downers, but there really have been some wonderful things that have happened. I think the thing that pleases more than anything else is strictly selfish. When I was a kid, I had absolutely no confidence in myself, none whatsoever, really I didn't. And I am being serious about that. If I were to get up in class my junior or senior year in high school my knees would knock like you could not believe. In fact there is one particular gal in this town always says that I am the guy that always has to put the class reunions together. I say, "Why me?"

"Well, because I can't imagine that you are the same guy that used to stumble all over himself in school." Now I stand on stage with a full Civic Center and think nothing of it.

People say, "How come? How did that happen?" Quite honestly, the military did it for me. You want to thank the military for doing that for you? Well, I have to. I will never forget where it all happened.
Some people say, "I remember when I was converted." Well I can remember what happened with me. We were on active duty in training in Louisiana and I was working my butt off, but I wasn’t getting anywhere. One of my dad’s friends back here said, "His problem is that he doesn’t know how to toot his horn." You can do that to excess too. What he was simply saying is that you have to assert yourself, if you have the ability. You have to evaluate yourself and ask yourself the question, "If I have any talent at all, what am I supposed to do with that talent?" As it turns out, we were down in Louisiana and there was an instructor teaching a lesson on the eighty-one millimeter mortar, and he just didn’t have any idea what he was talking about. Well, there is a paragraph in the Field Manual which says that you should never correct someone in the presence of others. And I believe that as a leader. But these two particular commanders, a Colonel and a Captain, were so upset with the lack of quality of instruction that they went up and one of them said, "Who around here knows how to teach this blankety-blank weapon?"

And I said, "I do sir."

He said, "Get over here and start teaching."

This was this bashful kid. I learned right then that if you know what you are talking about, and if you study, and if you really do become qualified then you should be able to speak on it. That to me was a learning experience, and the rest is history. It all fell in place. One thing followed another, and the first thing you know, I was getting responsibility and I didn’t even realize what was happening to me. I was propelled into situations where I had to prepare or else. Once that got to be a habit,
the rest is history.

TLB: It all came easy.

WS: Well, easy? Yes, I remember writing a staff study at Command and General Staff College, and I learned a major lesson there. My thesis was this, "To determine the best way of training personnel to operate at night." I did what I thought was a masterpiece. The instructor sent it back to me and said, "This is a fine piece of work, however you lost sight of the question. The question is to determine how to train people, your thesis was the advantages of night operation. That is not the question; the question is, 'How do you train people for that?'" There is another valuable lesson, try to recognize the issue before you open your mouth. If you think about that, it really becomes interesting. If you listen to a group and you hear some discussion, you would be amazed at the number of people who can talk for ten minutes, yet they miss the point completely. They don't even know what they are talking about.

TLB: So you are still involved with the military now?

WS: Yes.

TLB: With the Michigan...

WS: ...Emergency Volunteer Group.

TLB: And that formed in 1992?

WS: Actually it was formed when the State Legislature and Governor approved it in 1989.

TLB: Okay. And what exactly do you do with that?
General Staff has five primary officers called: G1, 2, 3, 4, 5. G1 is strictly personnel problems. How many people do you have? How many people do you need? Where are you going to get them? What education requirements? What specialties? All those little things. That includes on active duty such things as chaplains, mail, and replacements. Two is military intelligence. Applied to what we are doing you have to pretty much have a handle on the social climate of the community. In the event of a riot, for example, whose going to cause the riot if it happens? Where the sore spots are going to be? How much law enforcement is there? What is the communities attitude toward it? And all of these things. Three is sort of the superintendent of the schools. He or she is what they call the operations officer. That is the person who really puts it all together and makes it tick. The four is the logistical person. For example, if transportation is required, what type of transportation? How much of it? Where are you going to go? How much fuel do you need? And all those little things? And military ammunition, tanks, airplanes, you name it. The G5 is only on the general staff; it is never on a staff less than the general staff. And the terminology there is civil affairs, or the use of indigenous personal. Now indigenous personal in the Pacific, for example, could mean the use of natives to carry your rice, or ammunition, or radios. In the case of a civil disturbance in let’s just say Detroit, indigenous personal could be the Mayor, the Chief of Police, the City Council, the Fire Chief, the Prosecuting Attorney. Your counterparts. The unit in Kalamazoo, the reserve unit, just came back from Bosnia, or is returning from Bosnia right now. They were in Bosnia as a civil affairs unit.
When they go over there, they work with their civilian counterparts as advisors or help. Essentially that is the way this organization would function too.

TLB: I think that we are done. I am sure that there is a lot more that you could talk about. Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

WS: The one thing that I have wondered about is that as I get older I try to evaluate what that I have in my possession is going to be important to the history of this community. I remember one of the campaigns where I ran for reelection, someone from the museum called and wanted to know if I had anymore of the campaign signs. I said, "For what?" And they said, "For the Archives." Well I can understand that. Right now you have got some former mayors in the community. Mayor Bill Lamb, I guess, is the oldest right now. Well I don’t know if he is the oldest, but it has been quite awhile since he has been Mayor. He probably has a number of things that he would probably contribute to the community. Mayor Berghof would probably have something. Phil Tanis, I have no idea what he would accumulate. He was considerably younger and he may have a different perspective on history than I do. Although, his dad and some of his dad’s friends are very much involved in Holland Arts Council and the Historical Society. In my particular case, right here I have a book full of stuff that was put together when I was Mayor. I have a book full of stuff that was put together during my term as president of the Holland Board of Realtors. I’ve got another book full of stuff, that was during my term as President and Lieutenant Governor of Kiwanis. When you add all that stuff together there is some real history there. [Discussion on what to do with this material.] I have documents
from my dear friend, Bill Wichers, which are in themselves very precious documents
as far as I am concerned in the history of city. I have documents from a number of
congressman and senators. I think that there is a letter from George Bush. There is
a picture of Vice President George Bush and myself at that dedication of Evergreen
Commons. I have a beautiful letter from Dr. Van Wylen, who was then president of
Hope College. This kind of stuff, now that I am removed from it so far and I start
looking at it I think, "Wow, there is some interesting stuff here."

TLB: [suggestions for what to do with the material]

WS: [talks about why he feels that it is important for his memoirs to be preserved] I
remember one group of elementary school kids who wanted a tour of some of these
city facilities. We took them on a tour of the City Hall, and explained to them what
went on in all these different departments, took them to the police department, the
fire department. I remember one particular issue. This was right about the time
when the storm sewer along the east side of Centennial Park let loose. Much to our
chagrin, because our budget did not permit major improvement at that particular time.
It happened to be a major collector from north to south right straight to the Waste
Water Treatment plant, or the lake. The BPW people dug up that whole corridor.
Would you believe that there was a wooden sewer line in there? Pieces of actual
carved wood that made a sewer line. I was telling the kids that. The letters that I got
back from these kids, you would be surprised. Just about everybody would say,
"Your story about the wooden sewer line was neat!" [laughter] I think that there
may be a section of that line hanging in Environmental Health, if I am not mistaken.
That caught us by surprise.

[look at more photographs]

WS: I asked the postal system if they would do everything within their power to construct a post office whose design would be consistent with the objectives of our Mainstreet project, rather than a stereotypical federal building with four walls. And that is what we got. Whether I had a bearing on that is anybody's guess.

TLB: [continues looking through photos] I do think that it would be really wise for you to go through some of this with the thoughts of donating some of this to the Archives. Especially some of these letters.

WS: One of the things that you didn't ask me was, "What was our greatest disappointment?"

TLB: Yes, I did miss that.

WS: When you get involved in a issue that could be controversial, the problem from a political stand point is number one: to convey the fact that you are serious rather than being political, two: that your judgement is in the best interest of the community. That is one reason why I have such a difficult time with running for election every other year. Yesterday morning, I was at that little reception where Congressman Hoekstra endorsed Ms. Romeny. A congresswoman, for example, every two years he or she has to go through the same hoops. The first year you, hopefully, are doing your job. The second year, your preserving your scalp. You are saving your hide. Anything you say that second year can be perceived as being political, regardless of how serious you are. As Mayor, I found the same thing very difficult.
The marina was a very controversial issue. Why? A number of reasons. One of those reasons is that there were those who said marinas are only for rich people. I could not convince enough people, I believe, that there is an economic benefit to a community from a Marina. I couldn’t make people understand that softball fields are for athletes, but there is a benefit to the community. And that is the way it is, whether it be orchestras, or bands, or whatever, there is a benefit to the community. There were those who said, "Too noisy." Think about that, how many times have you gone by a marina and found traffic?" Launching ramps, probably. But a marina, no. I had a really difficult time conveying that. Well there are those who say that it is tax money, of course it is tax money. They don’t understand what kind of tax money. Every time you buy a gallon of gas for your automobile you are paying state tax for roads. Every time you buy a gallon of gas for a boat you are paying state tax for marinas. Lansing was willing to help us get a marina out of revenue that was collected from that kind of source. But there were those who were opposed to marinas, because they said it was a tax any way you cut it. Sure it is a tax, but it is a tax to take advantage of the benefits you have available. I hope that history proves that I was right, and that someday there will be one out there. And they will ask, "Why didn’t we do this twenty years ago?"

TLB: Okay. [information on transcription process]

[end of interview]