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Steffens, Margaret Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Margaret Steffens

Conducted February 13, 1997
by Louis Di Giuseppe

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
LG: Why don’t we start with what your maiden name was?

MS: Westveer.

LG: When were you born?

MS: April 9th, 1909

LG: Were you born in Holland?

MS: Yes, in Holland at my parents home at 318 Central Avenue.

LG: When did your family first come to Holland?

MS: They came from the Netherlands, they were all farmers and had small farms in the Netherlands. I visited my Grandmother Westveer’s home in the Netherlands.

LG: Why don’t you tell us a little bit about your family, about your spouse, about your children, and other places that you may have lived during your lifetime.

MS: I lived for eight years on 318 Central Avenue, and while I lived there, I remember roller skating around the block. That was a favorite occupation. Bill and John Winter had three-wheeled bicycles and they would let me ride on the back. There was a little platform on the back and they let me ride around. We did a lot of roller skating and we would go so fast around the block that in order to stop ourselves we would run into the grass. That was our favorite occupation when I was little in our small neighborhood. I lived there and went to Froebel School, which is where the college science building is today. Next to it was the junior high school building,
which once was the senior high school building years ago and my mother went to high school at that building. I lived at 188 West 11th Street when we moved, and then I attended the Maple Avenue School, today it is Washington School. I can remember going to that school because one thing that impressed me were the steps. There were so many steps that went from the first to the second floor and I can remember that so many feet had been on there that it had lost its measurement as a step. It was sort of like a little incline when you walked in that building. Then when I went to junior high school which is where the college science building is today and the library, in that area. That was junior high school, then I walked to Holland High School and I graduated from Holland High School in 1927.

LG: How about your husband and your children?

MS: I was married in April of 1936 in my parents living room at 188 West 11th Street. Henry. He was one year ahead of me in school. I didn’t know him then, I didn’t know him until after I graduated Northwestern University which was when I learned to know Henry had also been there as a graduate student. Neither one of us had a job and so we used to take walks in the evening. He would call me up and say, "How about a walk?" The first time I walked with him, I sat down at Central Avenue because he walked so fast and I couldn’t go, but I learned to walk faster after I continued walking. We were both without jobs for quite a part of that year until he found a position in the People’s State Bank. Later, I found a job, after a year, teaching in Rockford Michigan High School. I know what it is to be in a depression because those were the depression years. Things were not expensive, but we didn’t
I have much money either. It was very difficult. I have two children. Henry Westveer and Gretchen Elizabeth Steffens.

LG: She was born [date removed], 1944.

MS: Yes, and my son was born [date removed], 1939.

LG: Are they both living in Holland?

MS: No, my son lives in Midland. For twenty-seven years he was with Dow Chemical. Then, he was asked to retire because they were doing away with some of the operations and putting in computers. He does have a job now there in a small office where they examine everything that is published in this country against the Dow Company. There are many people that think they shouldn't be manufacturing and using what they are, and we used some of those products.

LG: Did they both go to school in Holland?

MS: They both graduated from Hope College and that's where he met his wife. She works in a research laboratory at Dow.

LG: Why don't you tell us about your daughter...

MS: Well, she has had a very interesting life. She was a very good student in school and she seized every opportunity that came to her. One came to her when she was at Holland High School taking a course in French. The teacher asked who would like to write to a student. She raised her hand for everything so she wrote to a student for five years. I asked if she wrote in French and she said that she didn't dare for fear of making a mistake. They wrote for five years. Then she received a letter from Pierre Robert asking if she could come and visit his country. She went to her father and
said, "May I go?" I thought he would probably say no, but he said, "Yes, but your mother is to go with you." In 1965, she and I flew to Paris. Before that, when Henry and I were there a few years before, we were in the village and in the community where he was living and we found Pierre. We found his house and we found the young man. He took us to the hotel and made our reservations for us. He came back in the evening and I asked if he could have dinner with us and he said no because he had promised to read to his blind professor. So, I thought that he was a nice fellow. He came in the evening with his parents. They had never met Americans and they wanted to see us. So, he sat between his father and my husband and did all of the translating. Then, he came and had breakfast with us the next morning and suggested, (we were going in the chateau country) and he suggested what would be interesting for us to visit, so we had a personally conducted tour before we started. It was just beautiful. Then, in 1965 Gretchen and I went over, so I knew him and we got to the airport and I said he would probably be there to meet us and he was at the bottom of the stairway. He had a car with him and we spent four days in Paris. He took us on walking tours, I don't mean a block, I mean blocks and blocks and blocks. Finally, I didn't want to say that I was tired, so I said that I must go back to the hotel and write a letter to my husband. Later, Gretchen said she was glad I wasn't with them because they were announcing over the loudspeaker at the Eiffel Tower to be careful of your handbags. We had a very nice time. Pierre took us in the southwest part of the country that he knew. We had a very nice tour with one of his fathers cars, and we ended up at his parents apartment later in the
tour. Then, in 1966 he came to visit us and in 1967 our daughter was married to a Frenchmen in our home. Pierre Robert.

LG: She’s been there ever since?

MS: When they were married, they left for France and he taught for two years in a French vise, and then they decided that they would like to live in the States. They came on a tour in Michigan of all of the small colleges looking for a position, and I don’t think they went to the University of Michigan or Michigan State, just the small colleges. They finally found an opening at Grand Valley, so he taught French there for about eleven years. Then they decided to return to France, and they did, and he is now a full professor at the University of Paris.

LG: Doesn’t your daughter teach English, too?

MS: Yes, my daughter teaches in three different schools. Political Science, Foreign and International Relations. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are the days that she teaches and her students are very interested in what is going on in this country, particularly in the Political Science Department. I have a friend down the hall who puts the Wall Street Journal he has in my door and I go through and look for things that would be interesting in her class. If she can use them then she makes copies or maybe just for her own information, but she says that the students are very interested in what’s going on in the states.

LG: Do they have any children?

MS: Yes, they have two daughters. They were both born in the States while their father was at Grand Valley. Anne is the oldest daughter, she is now twenty-four years old
and she is a graduate of Northwestern University. She finished graduation and didn’t
find a position immediately. She did work one summer at Barnes & Noble Bookstore
in Evanston, Illinois, which is good experience. After a period of about six months a
friend of her mothers called and asked if Anne had a job and she said no, so the
friend said that she would do some telephoning. Well, telephoning produced a chance
for an interview. She told me later that the person who interviewed her said that her
grandmother graduated from Northwestern University and asked if I thought that
made a difference. I said that I thought it did. So, today she’s in a relocation
agency, and they help people who work in Paris from the States. They find
apartments for them and answer their questions and find schools for their children.

[interruption]
LG: Margaret, what were some of the organizations that you were involved with?
MS: I was very interested in the American Association of University Women, and our
Holland chapter was organized in 1938 with twenty members. I am a charter member
and there is one other person who is a charter member; that is all that is left from the
original group. We met in each others homes, about twenty of us, when we
organized, because there was no other place to for us to meet. Now, we meet in
different places and our branch has grown a great deal. I think the most important
thing is the wonderful book sale that we have every year. This past year we raised
$8,000 in used book sales, and we always send a contribution to the national
headquarters for graduate women’s study, and we also return much of it to the
community in various projects for children.
LG: I understand that you were also president of the Herrick Library.

MS: Yes, I was and I had a wonderful time. I was on the board for fifteen years and I think after that they asked me to retire, which I did. Then, I served for ten years on the State of Michigan Library Board as a trustee.

LG: What are some of the biggest changes that you've seen happen in Holland in the last fifty years?

MS: Well, I think one of the biggest changes is the fact that I remember going downtown on an errand for my mother and practically everybody I would meet I knew, or knew their names or knew about them. Now, I go downtown and sometimes I don't see anybody I know. I know that the city is different. It has grown a great deal, and there are many people that I don't meet, and of course there are always some that I do see from time to time.

LG: What happened since the time that you were living in Holland and then you bought this house on Lake Michigan shore, and then you came here? Could you tell us a little bit about that?

MS: Well, I lived with my parents until I was married when I was twenty-seven years old. Then, I lived fifty-six years with my husband. We lived, when we first married, on Washington and 14th Street on the corner in a small house; we lived there eighteen years. Henry walked to work, and when I married him he was an employee at the People's State Bank. After that, he was an accountant with the Michigan Unemployment Compensation, that was what it was called when it was formed. He did a lot of traveling through Michigan. He would have to figure tax for people or
help them out if there were any problems and that was what he did, so he was continually travelling. I remember one time during the war he was traveling and had "A" stickers for gasoline which meant that he was always able to have gasoline. Our daughter was very young and I couldn’t get soap flakes, I suppose that isn’t very important, but it was important to me that day, and I could get very infuriated. He came home, opened the trunk of the car and told me to come and look. He had four boxes of American Family Soap Flakes and he had something like four pounds of butter which we weren’t able to get very often. He got it traveling some place. Somebody had some extra and they took care of him. Then, we lived at sixty-five West 12th Street for eighteen years and that was very handy because at that time Henry was Treasurer of Hope College for twenty-three years, and just down the street was the college. Our children both attended Hope College and graduated from Hope College, my husband did and then he did graduate work at Northwestern University. I have my Bachelors Degree in the School of Speech at Northwestern University. Henry had his Masters in Accounting.

LG: What are some of the qualities that stand out concerning the city of Holland? If you were to speak to a stranger about Holland, what would you say to them?

MS: When I think about the activities in Holland, I think of the church. We always had a Sunday school picnic. It was important to have this picnic in the summer because we didn’t have many picnics. We had the Sunday school picnic. I can still see the man making the lemonade in a barrel stirring it with some kind of a stick. Then, they had Rusk buns, I don’t know what they had in them for a filling, but they were Rusk
buns. Rusk buns made by the Rusk factory, only they were not brown, they were buns first, and the next process was to make it from a soft bun into a hard bun. There were two factories in Holland that made those Rusk's. I think one of the biggest things is that I don't know people like I used to. Another thing, we had no great auditorium. There were things at Holland High School, and there were things at Hope College, but there was no community building for things like basketball or any kind of an auditorium. We used the college gymnasium, and they would have pageants all of the time, they were devoted to pageants.

LG: What position did the church have in Holland?

MS: Very important place.

LG: In what way?

MS: I think you had your membership and that you also spent time in the church in various activities. They had organizations for children and Junior CE and things like that you would go to maybe on early Sunday evening. I always went to Sunday school when I was young, and I taught in the Sunday school in the department where they had five year olds. It was a class of little girls. I remember I was telling about Noah and the Ark, and it went on and on and this little blonde sat next to me and her eyes were wider and wider and she was so adorable. I told her all about the experiences of Noah's Ark, and when I finished she looked at me and said, "Is it true?" (laughs)

LG: Do you think, and in what way if it has, that the church has changed in the last fifty years?
MS: Yes, I think that the church has changed. We had a minister when I was young, but
we didn't have secretaries and we didn't have an assistant minister and didn't have the
activities in the church. We have study groups, Third Reformed Church is where I
was baptized, we have interesting speakers, we have participated in many things in
the church. It was not there when I was young except Sunday school and the church
service which we attended every Sunday. The church service was first, and then
Sunday school. There was a class for men and a class for women adults and they
were in a separate room. Then there was the beginning department of the Sunday
school, pre-school, and then there were classes for older children. That was where I
taught kindergarten ages when I was in Hope College for a short while.

LG: Did you ever get involved in controversial subjects like when did they consider
women as ministers as they do today in certain congregations? Was that ever a fact
or a position?

MS: I don't think so, but I think the church was very conservative. There was very little
ceremony in our church. We sang hymns and we had a long sermon, but I remember
when I went off to college and I had a chance to attend a service at the Episcopal
Church where my roommate attended. I was very impressed with the service. There
was a processional every Sunday, and the Bishop was there, and the "High Church" it
was called, and they had a very beautiful service. Then, the second year at
Northwestern I had a roommate who was a Methodist, and I went to the Methodist
church with her. Dr. Tittel was the minister and he was excellent. I remember
seeing the students who would come in late sitting on the floor in the balcony, not
wanting to go home because they wanted to hear Dr. Tittel. Many years afterwards, my granddaughter was a student at Northwestern and I was there to visit with her. I went over to the Methodist Church and I told them that I would like to see the sanctuary, which they opened for me, and they said that Dr. Tittel was buried in the sanctuary. He had been there thirty-five years as a minister and he was a wonderful man for all of the students at the college and the faculty. He was a wonderful minister; a very interesting gentleman.

LG: Has there ever been any controversy in Holland?

MS: Well, of course the biggest controversy was the splitting of the church. There was one church. All I know is what my mother told me, because her parents, of course, went through that. I think the biggest question was that someone came in and introduced the masonic orders to some of the men in Holland, and some of them joined it. It began the controversy in the church. I think that maybe they thought that they were giving too much attention to something like that and not to the church, but anyway, it resulted in a splitting of the church. The beautiful Pillar Church was our original church, and they couldn't settle their problems so they took it to court. The judge gave that church to the great group that left; I think sixty percent left and the remaining people were the First Reformed Church.

LG: The people who were in the Pillar Church, which was started with Albertus Van Raalte, was that the Christian Reformed...?

MS: That was one church, and then the split took place during the time after that church was built.
LG: So, what was the Reformed Church of America?

MS: Well, that's the one that I belong to. That is the original church, and then the split came with the Christian Reformed Church.

LG: I've heard from numerous people that there were so many problems between the various factions that they walked on opposite sides of the street, is that true?

MS: I don't know, but it was a very serious affair. The judge gave the beautiful Pillar Church to the group that left, so they remained there. Of course it's only what I've heard about the controversy, but my husband and I used to wonder if it was a power struggle.

LG: How do you feel the Dutch heritage plays in the community today?

MS: I think that it is very important. I think that we have a wonderful heritage and I think that we should spend time realizing what we have and appreciate what we've been able to do in this community.

LG: Well, we've been able to bring persons from outside of the community here, for example Tulip Time. That emphasizes not only tulips, but the Dutch Heritage. This interview today will go into the Archives.

MS: I would like to say one thing. Dr. John Nykerk at the college brought in musicians from out of town, from the Chicago Opera Company, and had performances for us, and it was in the college gymnasium. That was where we would go for culture. They were people from the Chicago Opera Company, or people like that or maybe a speaker. It was all done on the college campus; there was no other building to go to excepting a school. There were no community buildings like we have today.
LG: How has Hope College changed from when you went?

MS: The biggest change is in the enrollment. There are three thousand students there now, when I was there, there were four hundred.

LG: We know today that Hope College has an excellent science program, and it also has an excellent music program. Were those programs in existence then?

MS: Yes, they were. They weren't as extensive, nor as many, but there were programs. One woman was devoted to giving pageants and we used to go see pageants in the college gymnasium. That was the only large building available.

LG: How do you feel about the diversification that's taking place in Holland? We know that people from different backgrounds had come into Holland twenty, thirty, forty years ago and established certain enclaves within Holland.

MS: I think that has made the town successful. I think you can be too close with just the same group, and I'm glad that these people came in from away. They had different backgrounds and different ideas and I think that is why we progressed.

LG: I see that you are expressing your own feeling, but do you think that this was prevalent through most of the people in Holland?

MS: I don't know.

LG: Was there any antagonism towards any other groups?

MS: Well, they called the people who were not Dutch, "Yankees." My mother said that her mother said, "Now, be careful with the Yankees!" I don't know what they expected, but to be careful. Hope Reformed Church was started as a second reformed church in Holland and that was established as English speaking right away
because there were so many faculty members at Hope College. But, even the church I belong to, Third Reformed, originally started in the Dutch language and then changed into English after a short time.

LG: At one point in time, this was an agrarian community with farms and there certainly weren’t enough people of Dutch descent to work in the farms, and people had to be employed here which came from other places. I’m speaking primarily of the Mexicans that were brought up and that eventually stayed here.

MS: Yes, they worked in the fields in the berry patches.

LG: How did you feel about that? What was the response of the community at that time? Did they welcome them?

MS: Yes. They tried to establish programs for them. I volunteered one time and I went out in a berry patch where a mother was picking berries and had some small children out there, and we entertained them. Played ball with them, school aged children, telling stories and entertaining them for a period of time while the mother was busy in the field.

LG: Is there anything else you would like to bring to our attention? What were some of the daily schedules of the family members? How did they spend their time at home and holidays during your time in Holland?

MS: Well, I went to Froebel School and then junior and senior high school. I belonged to a local sorority in Holland High School and we had parties in the spring. There was no dancing allowed in the school, so we had parties outside at some restaurant or hotel, many times someplace in Saugatuck we’d have a party: a dinner and a dance.
LG: What kind of family celebrations were held?

MS: Thanksgiving was the big celebration and you met with the members of the family. We did for many years. My grandfather lived on East 14th Street, and he and his second wife, my first grandmother died long before my mother was married, but our second grandmother was very nice to us. She had us over every Thanksgiving all day. We came for a dinner at noon, and we had a supper in the evening. It was too cold to play outside so we would play inside. I remember we played a game called "Walking to Jerusalem" or something like that. You had so many chairs and you would take one chair out and there would be six kids and only five chairs and of course that person was out. "Musical Chairs." I remember my grandfather looking at us one time, I guess he had heard enough racket. As we got older, we usually went to the Colonial Theater on Thanksgiving afternoon and that was fun because we could see a movie and it was too cold to play outdoors and so we were occupied for a period of time.

LG: Were there family reunions then and where were they held?

MS: They were held in someone's home. Some people would have them in the summertime at some picnic grounds or you would have them in the home. We did our family reunion of course in the winter at Thanksgiving time. There would be places to go in the summer. There were picnic grounds around the town where you could go.

LG: There was a large celebration fifty years ago at the 100th anniversary of the town. Were you at all involved with that?
MS: No.

LG: How were weddings, baptisms, funerals, and other ceremonies held?

MS: Well, in the church or in the home. When someone died in Holland, they put a wreath on the door, and that was there for several days after the death of a person. Then, you knew that there was a death in that family. My mother told me that at the time that the community was young, there was no doctor and no nurse. There was a great deal of Malaria and many deaths and other diseases of course. One day, one of the young men who was in the community said, "I'll go to Grand Rapids on my horse." Now, there was no road to Grand Rapids, he went through the woods to get some medicine for the people who were ill, and he came back with medicine so he must have had quite a journey from Holland to Grand Rapids through the woods. I'm sure he saved some people's lives because they were able to have medicine, and there was no doctor, no nurses, nothing here at first.

LG: Were weddings ever held in the homes?

MS: Yes. Mostly in the homes. I was married at home.

LG: How about we get back to burials or deaths, did women wear black?

MS: Yes. You were identified as a widow by your clothing. My grandmother Westveer was a widow. I'm not sure exactly what year, but she was much younger than her husband, so she was a widow at quite a young age. She had to wear black, not only did she have to wear black, she wore black. She wore a black and white apron I can remember during the week, and on Sunday when she went to church she wore a black silk dress and a black hat. So, she was identified in the church as a widow.
LG: I can remember my father when his brother had died wearing a black band on his arm. Was there any particular dress that the man wore?

MS: Yes, I've seen that on a man's arm, and a widow continued to wear black for many years which they don't do today. You were kind of set aside.

LG: Aside from the parents, what other adults participated in the disciplining of children? Did grandparents participate in rearing their grandchildren?

MS: I don't know. I had my parents but my grandparents had nothing to do with my training. I had it at home from my mother and father, mostly from my mother who has been a teacher. I had her in the fourth grade. She was a substitute teacher in the fourth grade when I was in what is now Washington School and used to be Maple Avenue School. She taught us fractions. She brought apples to school and she cut up an apple to show us a whole and parts of the whole.

LG: Any particular conflicts that occurred in the family that you particularly remember?

MS: I don't think we had a conflicting attitude at our home. My mother ran the house. She was an excellent housekeeper and excellent cook. We were taught to behave and to be polite and to mind our manners. We had a very fine household. I can remember our parents taking us to a movie on New Year's Day one year. My brother turned cartwheels we were so excited to go to the Strand Theater and see a movie on New Year's Day. That was entertainment for us.

LG: Did married children continue to live in the parents household?

MS: I don't know.

LG: Did aging parents live in the children's households?
MS: Yes. My mother told me their grandparents, her father's parents, lived with them when they could no longer run the farm and the grandfather could not do anything anymore. They lived there until they died in their home. That's why my mother and her sisters and brothers learned the Dutch language because those grandparents didn't learn English. How they existed in the community I don't know, but they didn't learn English, so they had to learn Dutch if they wanted to communicate with the grandparents, so they did.

LG: Did you speak Dutch?

MS: No. I never learned Dutch.

LG: Did your parents speak Dutch?

MS: A little bit. Not very much. They used to speak, if they wanted to communicate sometimes, they used the Dutch language. We wondered why; I don't know why they did maybe they just thought it was fun. I don't know.

LG: Where were any persons that were treated as "black sheep" and how did this effect their relationship to family members?

MS: I remember my mother telling me about a young man who was in her class at high school and they had a school picnic. She remembered that student because he took the cupcakes, which they had for the picnic, and decided they would be balls and he threw them across the ravine. She said that was their dessert for the picnic and they didn't think much of him. She said he turned out to be no good. He didn't do anything aggressive, but he was not a good citizen.

LG: At what age did sons and daughters leave home to embark on their careers? Is it the
way it is today, after they had left high school to go on to college?

MS: Many of them did not graduate from high school, and many of them did not go on to college. Their education finished either at high school or sometimes maybe half-way through High School. Some students would just finish at age sixteen and not continue.

LG: Did parents help their children in college or in business?

MS: Oh, yes. My father graduated from the Hope College Preparatory Department which is like Holland High School, and my mother was a graduate of Holland High School. He [my father] then attended a Holland Business College to receive that kind of training, and then he was ready for a position. That equipped him for his position. Then, he went into the office at the Holland Furniture Company and the Holland Shoe Company and finally to the First State Bank and he was there for forty years as Assistant Cashier.

LG: Who cared for the sick or dependent family members?

MS: Someone in the household.

LG: Were the children expected to take care of their parents?

MS: Yes, they were expected to take care of their parents. There was no Holland Hospital. The first hospital came, I can remember when I was quite young. There was a building that a nurse set up as a hospital on the shore of Lake Macatawa. North Shore I think it was. So, you had to be taken care of in your home. Whooping cough and Diphtheria. In my mother’s family two children died from Diphtheria, and there were other diseases where people were taken care of at home.
There was no other place to go there was no hospital.

LG: On the corner of Centennial Park that was Holland Hospital run by a doctor and his wife, which later became a fraternity house which later became the museum.

MS: Dr. Kramer’s home. I remember walking through his yard because we could get to Froebel School a little faster. So, we cut through his yard. I don’t think it was really that much difference in time, but it was just fun to walk through his yard because he had a grape arbor, and it decorated part of his yard.

LG: I remember speaking with someone after going there that had been born there as one of the house members at that time. Well Margaret, this has been a delightful afternoon. I’m sure there will be many other people who’ll be interested in knowing about you, your family, and your experiences. You are now a part of the 150th anniversary. Thank you very, very much.