11-3-1997

Stronks, Bill Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Bill Stronks

Conducted November 3, 1997
by Geoffrey Reynolds

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
GR: Could you please state your name and date of birth?

BS: Willard Stronks, I was born [date removed], 1921.

GR: And you go by "Bill" you said?

BS: I go by Bill. I changed that. When I was growing up, all the growing up years back home, the kids called me Willie. Oh, I couldn’t stand that. So when I left home for college, I immediately changed it to Bill.

GR: Where were you born, Bill?

BS: I was born in Holland.

GR: Where exactly in Holland?

BS: I was born in Holland and my wife says I’m just an old antique because I was born in the old museum, which was previously the hospital, and before that was owned by a private family. I think now it is a Bed and Breakfast.

GR: On Central?

BS: Yes.

GR: Describe your first impressions of Holland as a boy.

BS: Oh, I loved Holland. I’ll tell you why. My dad was a school teacher and the only job he could get was down in the mid-part of Illinois, about 150 miles south of Chicago. It was nothing but farmland, no rivers, no woods. We always said it was all corn and hogs; that’s all it was. But because it was a teaching job, he had the summers off.
My mother came from Holland. My mother's maiden name was Dyke. It was her family that came from the Dyke builders, maybe you have heard of them. They were the boys who built the Holland Hospital, the Warm Friend Tavern, and they built the Hope College Chapel. Those were her brothers. So we came up here in the summertime and we rented a cottage out at Central Park. My dad knew the owner of the old Model Laundry which used to be downtown across from the Knickerbocker Theatre. And he could get a job there in the summertime. And us kids as we got old enough to work there part-time, then we worked there too. But it gave us the opportunity to be in Holland all summer, to live on the lake all summer, and we just loved it. We hated to go home in the fall.

GR: What are some organizations or activities you’ve been involved in while in Holland?

BS: Well, of course, I came to Holland after I graduated from high school. I came to Holland to Hope College. I came there because my dad wanted me to. He was a graduate himself. My sister graduated in '39, and I came in '40. He wanted me to come to Hope College. He knew some of the professors; he got me a room. I stayed with Professor Lampen. He was a mathematics professor at the time. I stayed in his home and I had jobs on campus. One of my jobs was helping to pull the snow plow around the block. Another one was shoveling coal in the furnace in the science building and cleaning up on Saturday mornings. That's the way I earned my way through school. I only stayed two years, though, because I wanted to be an engineer and there simply wasn't any engineering possibilities at Hope. So I transferred to the Upper Peninsula to Michigan Tech. And there I remained until the war started and
then I went into the war. As far as any organizations is concerned, I can't think of any organizations that I was involved in to speak of. Some of my fondest memories, of course, of Holland are back in the days of the boats when the North and South American and the Alabama always wintered here. They were used for hotels during Tulip Time because they needed the space. The Holland Furnace Company, which was very prominent at that time, sponsored movie stars to come to Holland to be in the parades. I can remember I worked on the Alabama during Tulip Time. We had Dorothy Lamoor and we had Spencer Tracey and we had Lula Bell and Scottie. Some of these people that stayed on the boats, and the some of the experiences we had with those movie stars was really something.

GR: Can you remember any in particular?

SC: Well, yes (laughs). I can remember when Spencer Tracey came on board, he was drunk. He was so drunk, he could hardly walk. His manager had to help him aboard. But he stayed either the North or South American, and I happened to be working on the Alabama. Well, when Lula Bell and Scottie came, Lula Bell went on one of the big boats and Scottie stayed on the Alabama, why I don't know. Anyway, I was a bellhop on the Alabama and there's kind of something to that. It's kind of funny. In order to work on the boat, it was almost like a union, you had to have seamen's papers in order to work on one of the boats. I didn't have any seaman's papers. So they gave me a little written test, that didn't amount to anything and I ended up being an oiler. That's what they called me, but I was really just a bellhop. But Scottie had his manager with him in the cabin, and if there was anything they needed they pushed the
button and down in the main lobby there was a switchboard with little levers on that would flip down and you could watch those and you would know what cabin was calling you. We all had our own section. Well, they happened to be in my section. So he'd flip the flipper down and I'd go up there and he'd want a drink. So I'd go down and get a drink and bring it up to him. After several times, I guess his manager thought he was getting too much and every time I'd go up with a drink the manager would stick his arm out the door and give me the money and say, "You drink the drink" (laughs). So I got paid and I got to drink too! (laughs loudly) But there was another incident that I never will forget. I was a pretty innocent kid, at that age anyway, and there were two couples that stayed in one of the state rooms. They rang the bell and I went up and they ordered some drinks. So when I came back up with the drinks, one gentleman was sitting in a chair and his wife was sitting on his lap, and the other gentleman and his wife, or girlfriend, I don't know what they were, were sitting on the edge of the bed. I passed out the drinks to them, and the lady who was sitting on the bed, she looked at me and she said, "I suppose you want a tip." Well that was very embarrassing to me and I just said, "Well, that would be nice, but not necessarily." She said, "Well if you want it you're going to have to get it." And she pulled her dress up like this and tucked down inside of her silk stocking was a big coin; I don't even remember what it was. Well, I wasn't about to let go without that tip, so I had to push that coin all the way up to get it out of there. Boy, was I embarrassed! (laughs) They laughed and they laughed. They thought that was so funny. But that's typical of the kind of stuff you run into on the ships. Yes, it was
really something.

GR: Since you've come to Holland, what have been some of the most significant changes and what has caused them do you think?

BS: Well, of course, the biggest change - I think a lot of people are not to happy with it - is the change in the population. I can remember when I was a kid. You could go up and down 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th Street, any of these, and you would see all the Dutch people sitting out on the front steps sprinkling their lawns. Everything was so manicured and painted. And now so many of those streets have deteriorated. The lawns aren't even mowed. Nobody sprinkles in a lot of areas. It's just a failing that I don't think has been good for Holland. I know how it came about. I mean, the immigrants were brought in for pickle picking and working in the factories. And the Dutch people treated them so good, they decided to stay. I can't blame them for that at all. They took care of their kids when they were out in the fields and they fed them and they took real good care of them. That's what has caused the change in the population. That's one of the changes that has happened that I don't like. I think we've lost a lot of the culture that way. Although, thankfully, we are making a big effort to maintain it, and are trying desperately to do that. And they are doing a pretty good job of it at that. Some of the changes I've seen that don't affect the town in any way, but I remember - I started working in the Model Laundry which no longer exists. When I was old enough to get a chauffeur's license, in the summertime I drove truck for the West Michigan Laundry, which was out on 17th Street, and now I think it's a linen service, West Michigan Linen Service or something. But it was a laundry. In
the summertime they always added an extra route, which I was fortunate enough to get. It was the north shore. I went all the way from Waukazoo, and that was when Waukazoo had a hotel yet. That was one of my customers. Then I’d go from there to Ottawa Beach which was one of my customers. That was always kind of nice because I took my swimming suit along and I could change in the back of the truck, take a quick dip before I went on along the lakeshore all the way up to Port Sheldon, which was the end of my route. But that gave me some nice memories. Another nice memory I have of Holland was when Charlie Sligh - he was the founder of the Sligh Furniture Company. Charlie lived out on South Shore Drive. I think he was one of the first ones, not only in Michigan, but even in the country, to get heavily involved in waterskiing. He built the first ramp jump out in front of his place, down towards Macatawa Park. He took some of us younger kids, I was lucky enough to be one of them, and taught us how to water ski and taught us how to go off the jump. We never did get good enough to go into competition, however, he did. He went into some national competition and I think he won some things too. But that was interesting. Of course, I remember the old hotel at Macatawa Park. Before that was all torn down that was a beautiful old place. We used to go swimming at Macatawa Park all the time. One of my biggest gripes right now is the fact that we can’t even get out to the lighthouse. I think that is really a sad situation that one individual could control enough property and exert enough pressure around there that the populace can’t even get free passage out to the lighthouse. Waukazoo Inn, of course, was still there when I was growing up. The hotel was a very popular spot. I can remember they used to
hire a lot of girls from Hope College to do the serving in the dining rooms and doing
the housekeeping work. A lot of us fellows who lived in Central Park, which was
right straight across from there, we used to swim across the lake just to see the girls
(laughs).

GR: Now, did the college provide all the domestic help for the hotels?

BS: Not all, but they hired quite a few, because it was strictly summertime help. The Inn
wasn’t even open in the wintertime.

GR: Do you remember much about the Macatawa Park cottages and those owners?

BS: Up in the hills? I didn’t know any of them personally, no. I remember the cottages.
I still love to wander up through those hills and see those beautiful big cottages. We
do that every once in awhile. We’ll park the car down by the boat works, because
they won’t let you go any farther, and then wander up through all those roads and end
up down at the beach, and we take the beach down to the lighthouse. So that’s one
way of getting there anyway. I don’t know if it’s supposed to be allowed or not, but
we do it. I can remember my dad telling about all those cottages up there when he
was in college. And of course, that goes back a long ways. He used to take the
interurban from Holland out to Macatawa Park and the Model Laundry kept a big push
cart out there. He had to take that push cart and push it up all through the hills there
to collect the laundry and then get it back on the interurban to bring it back to
Holland, the laundry. He used to tell about that. It was an all-day affair for him. He
even had a rowboat there, and he’d row across to Ottawa Beach and pick up laundry at
the Ottawa Beach Hotel, which was still in existence when he was around. But I
never saw that. That burnt down before my time.

GR: Did any of the local kids interact with the resort kids?

BS: Oh yes. Living out at Central Park like we did, of course there was a lot of resorters right around there. I was real fortunate, in that I just came from a very average family financially, I got to associate with a lot of the rich kids who had the play things that we enjoyed. One family for example was the Battjes family. They owned the Grand Rapids Gravel Company, lived just a few doors down from where we had our little cottage. I used to run around with those kids and they had a Chris Craft. Of course in those days, a Chris Craft was the height of luxury. Then there was another family that lived there. They owned the Keefer Tannery in Grand Rapids. And that boy was a real sailor. He had a beautiful sailboat. We’d sail from here down to Saugatuck, anchor there and stay overnight, and come back the next day. So I got the benefit of all that stuff even though I wasn’t one of them. But they were good friends.

GR: Holland has been recognized as one of ten All-American cities. What qualities do you think earned Holland this honor?

BS: I still have to go back to saying it’s the Dutch heritage and how that has maintained a stability in the area. Because along with the Dutch heritage of course, you always get a very deep religious heritage. The town has lots of churches. For many years, no liquor was allowed in town. The Dutch were always noted for their cleanliness and they took great pride in the appearance of the town. The Dutch also have always been known for their love of the arts, and Holland has always tried to maintain the highest quality in the arts, music, and otherwise. And I think we are so fortunate to have
Hope College here. We here at Freedom Village, for example, certainly benefit from it. A lot of the students, faculty, and choruses, and so forth from there, they love to come over here. It’s just a practice session for them, but it’s a concert for us. We enjoy that very much. So, those are some of things that I think have helped to make the city what it is today, and the very strong effort they have made to hold onto it, where other towns have let it slide away from them, Holland has gathered it in and tried to...and we were very fortunate, of course, to have men like Ed Prince and some of these wealthy individuals who were willing to put their money where their mouth was, which has helped tremendously.

GR: What things does the community still need to work on in your opinion?

BS: One of our biggest problems right now would probably be inter-racial problems. Any time you get a predominance of any race in any city, they tend to be very clannish. You know, they stick together. They want their own part of town. They want to maintain their own language. They want their own religion, their own foods. I am not excluding the Dutch from this, because they were always figured to be pretty clannish too all through the years. But working on the inter-racial question is something that they are going to have to be working on constantly. You see it in the paper everyday. One race is declaring that they are not treated equally. Every time there is a robbery or a burglary, one race is always accusing the other before they even know the circumstances. So I think that’s the biggest problem. But I do think that if the work ethic continues in this area as it is right now where anybody can get a job if they want to. And that’s something we should continue too do is to constantly take
people off welfare if we can and force them to go to work if we have to, because the jobs are there and there’s no reason they shouldn’t be working. If they’re working and making money, that’s one thing that should cause the races to become more equal because they can buy and sell and own property and things that would bring them together. So often when you have racial problems, it’s one race that claims that they can’t get a job or they don’t have this or they don’t have that. But I don’t think any race in Holland can say that today. I really don’t think there’s any excuse for anything like that at all.

GR: Are there any additional negative aspects of Holland that you can think of?

BS: No, I can’t, and I appreciate their efforts at trying to make Lake Macatawa - or as I always remembered it was always Black Lake, Black River Black Lake, that’s the way I remember it - a cleaner body of water. That’s something we’ve got to be working on more. Particularly down through this area here, you can see the filth and growth that comes from pollution. This year it was greatly improved. I think probably due to the high water more than anything else. I would like to see the area around Windmill Island improved. I don’t know, but the idea of a complete village there, that’s a question in my mind. I know one thing, you’re going have to do something to attract people, young people, maybe some little rides like the ferris wheel or something, maybe some little electric boats that you can ride up and down in the canals, or any little thing that’s going to attract young people. If the kids want to go, then the parents go too. The idea of the concerts that they have there in the summertime are great. I think we need more of that. It doesn’t have to be big time stuff. The Legion
Band, you know, gives concerts in the other park; they could on some over here. Hope College faculty or students could put on some things out here. Maybe if they had more of a place to put on their programs, like the band shell, for an orchestra or a band or whatever, might help to attract some things. But I would like to see that. I would like to see the area surrounding here developed into more of a wildlife sanctuary, especially for the birds. The migrating birds come through here all the time. But this fall, we’ve been hearing shooting out here every morning. 6:30, 7:00, 7:30 in the morning they’re shooting. I don’t think hunting is allowed within the city limits, and I don’t know whether the shooting is coming from over there or over here or what, but we can hear it in the morning and I don’t think it should be allowed. I just don’t know what it is. Although I do know that off of Windmill Island they do shoot some muskrats and stuff once in awhile to keep them form undermining there. Other than that, I like the idea that they are looking forward to a new recreation center, what they were planning on putting on the waterfront down here. I think it’s a great idea. I don’t know if they’ll ever be able to get people to sign to agree to vote that it along with Windmill Island projects or not. It just seems like maybe they’d be biting off a little more than they can chew all at once. But it’s good that the idea is there and they’re in place and that they’re going to be working on them. It means the town is constantly striving to become better, which is what we want.

GR: Describe the roll the church has played in your life.

BS: Church is very important. I was born into the Reformed Church, but when we move to Illinois there was no such thing down there. In fact, if they asked you what church
you belonged to and you said Reformed Church, they thought you were nuts, or some kind of a Holy Roller or something like that. You never heard of it before. So we were members of the Presbyterian Church down there for many years. But when I moved back to Michigan, I went back to the Reformed Church and then eventually I ended up in the Christian Reformed Church in Hudsonville where I lived prior to coming here. Our membership is still there right at the present time until we find a place we want in Holland. We’ve been doing a lot of looking. I think we’ve visited every church in town (laughs). But church is a very important part of my life. I realized it more and more during the war years, when I spent two and half years in Burma, which is probably one of the worst places in the world anybody would want to live. My faith certainly grew there and became more solid, and I realized more and more how important it was to me. When I look back on all those days now, and I think I came through four years of war, two and half years of it overseas, and I never got a scratch out of the whole thing. I think, "My how the Lord had blessed me."

GR: How did you decide to join the current church your involved with in Hudsonville?

BS: Well, we’ve belonged to that church for 25 years. For one thing, it was handy. It was just two blocks from where we lived. It was of the denomination we had previously belonged to. Friendly people, good pastor, wonderful music program. I love music. To me, music is a very important part of church life - choirs, bell choirs, good organists, soloists. I love it all, and to me it’s so stimulating it becomes so part of my church life that I’ve got to have it. I just couldn’t do without it, even just the singing of the hymns. Of course I’m old fashioned enough that the old hymns are still my
favorite. I find it hard all these new songs that they flash up on the screen, they call them praise songs and so forth - all right, but not really for me. I don’t know the music. I asked a pastor once in one church, I said, "You put all these word up on the screen there. I don’t know the music. Why don’t you put the music along with it?"
"Well, " he says, "you’ve got to realize most people can’t read music anyway." I said, "Aw, come on." I don’t believe it (laughs).

GR: What role does the church play in Holland as a city and community and at the college?

BS: Well, of course, I mentioned that before. I think it plays an immense part of the overall picture of Holland. It was the beginning of Holland. It was the religion that brought the people here. And it’s been religion that’s sustained the town all through these years. Even though denominations have changed a lot in Holland - for example, the Catholics. A lot of more Catholic people have moved into town and they’re building new churches and so forth. That’s fine. It adds to the diversification. But I think religion will always be an extremely important part of Holland. I would hate to live here if it wasn’t.

GR: How about at Hope College?

BS: I see it slipping a little at Hope. I liked the idea when I went to Hope: you used to have to attend chapel services every morning before classes. Everybody went to the chapel. I thought that was a very fine way to start off the day. It’s the same way you find in a lot of Christian high schools and so forth today. The kids go to chapel services before they go to their classes. It’s a very fine way to start off a day. I think
Hope has done away with that if I understand right. I don’t think they have to do that anymore, maybe it’s because they’ve got too many students. I don’t know the reasons for it, but I do think Hope has gotten away a little bit from being basically a religious oriented school. It’s the same way with Calvin College in Grand Rapids. As they have attempted to modernize and expand their curriculum, they get farther and farther away from the religious roots that they had. I guess I can’t complain. I don’t ever see or hear or read too much about problems at Hope with the students, which speaks well for the school. It means they’re sustaining some sort of a program there to keep everything under control, which is the way it should be. So I got no complaints.

GR: As you see it, what role does Hope College play in the community?

BS: Like I say, right here in Freedom Village we benefit from Hope College and the arts that they produce over there - the plays, the musicals, all these things that they contribute to town. Their sport program is of great interest to a lot of the people in Holland. They wouldn’t think of not going to the basketball games or anything like that. The rivalry between Hope and Calvin is a never ending thing. I think any small college is a real attribute to the town that it’s located in. I saw that in Illinois, little Mammoth College, and some of the other colleges. And the towns that were they located in seemed to be oriented around the college. There was a lot of college professors and people who worked at the college. The whole little community just seemed to revolve around the school and it becomes a major part of the town. And I think Hope is a major part of Holland too.

GR: What is your heritage, background?
BS: Well, I'm from Dutch background. My father was born in northwest Iowa, up in Alton, Iowa, which is another area where the Dutch settled. Sheldon, Iowa; Alton, Iowa; all that area up there was all Dutch. My grandfather owned a general store up there. He was quite wealthy. He bought a lot of land across the border in North Dakota. He would lease the that out to farmers for growing crops on, and he'd take a percentage of the crop. That went very well until the Depression came along, and then he lost all that land because he couldn't pay the taxes on it. But that's my background. My grandfather did not come from the old country; it was my great-grandfather. But on my mother's side now, her name was Dyke. And her father, that would be my grandfather, came from the old country. They lived on 14th Street, right across the street from what is Fourteenth Street Church. I just barely remember him. There were about eight kids in the family. My mother was the youngest. So by the time I came along, some of her brothers and sisters had died already. So I don't remember an awful lot about the Dykes. She had one sister who married; her name was Spoelstra. Her son was Waddie Spoelstra. Now Waddie Spoelstra, when he attended Hope, he was a good basketball player. He wrote up all the sports articles and everything for the local Sentinel newspaper. After he graduated he got a job for the Detroit Free Press, taking care of the sports until he got to be the head of all the sports writing for the Detroit Free Press. He became quite successful at that.

GR: How has the role of women changed in Holland over the past several decades in work, family, church, and education?

BS: Like I told you, considering the fact that I haven't lived here that much - because after
the war was over with and I had my engineering degree, I went to work in Grand Rapids; so that’s where I lived. I used to love to come to Holland to go the beach and things like that. I had very little relation around here any more. I haven’t lived in Grand Rapids [Holland?] until we moved here to Freedom Village just a couple years ago. So I can’t really answer. I would say generally it would the same here as it is anywhere. More and more women are working. Mothers are working. Children are being put in places to be taken care of while they work. They seem to think they have to have a double income in order to survive. But the reason for it is they expect to start out where us old people left off. If we had a little two-bedroom board home, we were satisfied with that, and we figured that was it. But nowadays, the young people are not satisfied with that anymore. You go out through all the suburban areas and see the kind of homes that they’re building and buying, sure, they’ve got to have two incomes to pay for that. There’s no way you could do it otherwise. I don’t see anything wrong with that except it just seems to me that it has a tendency to break up the family life. And that’s one reason why, because the women have more and more independence. They have their own salaries. They drive their own cars. You see a much higher divorce rate nowadays. I think as a direct result of that, the families don’t do so much together as we did when we were kids. When I was a kid, mother and dad never went anywhere without taking the kids along. Now they get a babysitter and take off and go do their own thing - a lot without the kids. I really don’t like it myself. I don’t like to see it going in that direction because to me the family is too important. I think a lot of the crime we have nowadays is due to the fact
that the families are breaking up. Too many fatherless children. Things like that, no
good can come out of it.

GR: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland?

BS: Well, I'm not too much aware because I've only been here two years. So I'm not too
much aware of the things that have been going on. Politically, I can't speak at all
about those things. So I really can't even give you an answer on that.

GR: Tell me about a job you've had in Holland that you really enjoyed, or one that you
really didn't enjoy.

BS: The only jobs I had in Holland were summertime jobs. One was the couple summers
I spent on the Alabama, and the rest of the summers I spent working either in the
Model Laundry, which I didn't like because it was hot and steamy and I had to work
at night. See the laundries would be brought in maybe 5, 6 o'clock in the evening.
Then my dad and I would hang around there until midnight or after sorting all that out
and stamping it and getting it ready for washing the next day. That was our job.
Well, I didn't like that because it kept me away from my dates and all that things you
know. But then when I got the job driving the truck for West Michigan Laundry, I
liked that. That was a nice job. I enjoyed that. It was just a summer job of course,
but it was fulfilling and I had a nice area to cover. I had a lot of experiences that
were crazy on that, too, just like working on the boats. You'd be surprised when you
run a laundry route going door to door, things like being propositioned, things like that
that you run into. It's just amazing (laughs).

GR: Is there a perceivable generation gap in Holland as you see it?
BS: No, I don’t see it. Here again, I haven’t been here long enough or deeply involved enough in things to speak on that. We don’t experience it here. We feel very fortunate, for example, several of the churches run buses here to pick people up to bring them to church services, which is a very fine thing. We have people come here, like I told you, to entertain, which we think is very fine. I think the city of Holland perceives Freedom Village as being a place of very wealthy people, that you have to be very wealthy to live here, which is a wrong perception because actually it’s not that way. It’s not cheap to live here, but it’s not cheap to live any place. When you figure when we come in here that we don’t pay any taxes or insurance or light bills or heat bills or any of that stuff, it really isn’t all that bad. And although I do feel that were blessed to be here, there are here who couldn’t afford it. I realize that. But if you look at the background of the people in Freedom Village, you see a lot of retired school teachers, postal workers, doctors, and ministers. So they certainly don’t all come from wealthy backgrounds.

GR: Can you define your generation in any particular way? What have they experienced and how do they look at themselves?

BS: My generation grew up in the days of the Depression. Most young people today don’t even know what you’re talking about when you talk about it, let alone World War II. They’ve just about forgot about that. But the days of the Depression, when people were starving and there was no work, I can remember even here in Holland people going out and walking for miles along the railroad track to pick up pieces of coal that had dropped off the coal cars in order to have enough fuel to have heat in their homes.
Through difficulties like this, and living through difficult time like this, it gives you a different kind of outlook on life. It gives you a work ethic. You know you have to work. And you want to work because during those days there wasn’t any work. So you want to work and you want to get the things you were never able to get. I think today, too much emphasis is placed on worldly things, worldly goods. Everybody’s got to have two cars, and they got to have a boat, and they got to have snowmobiles and Ski-Doos, and all these toys that almost become a necessity to some of the younger generation. I don’t like that. I think they’re putting the emphasis in the wrong place. I don’t begrudge them having a good time and having some of these things if they can afford it. But I think if day we would have a total collapse in our finances like we did at the time of the Depression, there would be an awful lot of people who lose their home and so forth because they’re into debt up to their necks in mortgages. And I don’t think they could sustain themselves for any length of time if such a crisis would hit us again.

GR: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed over the past fifty years? How is life different now, from your college days to your retirement days?

BS: Holland has become more and more of an industrial town. Back in my college days, the only industry that I can remember around here was the pickle factory, Sligh Furniture Factory, Holland Furnace Company, Chris Craft boat factory - not a great deal more than that. Those were the big people. If you didn’t work in one of those places, or in any of the small businesses, you probably worked more out in agriculture.
There was a lot more agriculture going on in the surrounding area than you have now because it’s built up so much now that the agriculture land is fast disappearing. I don’t think I’ll live to see it, but I wouldn’t be a bit surprised that you’re going to see the day when Holland is going to be joining Zeeland, and Zeeland is going to be joining Hudsonville, and Hudsonville is going to be joining Grandville, and Grandville, Grand Rapids. And also to the north, Holland is going to the north farther and farther, not too far from Grand Haven anymore. Pretty soon it’s going to be one huge complex of industries big and small. Bed and Breakfasts, no not bed and breakfasts, but, what do they call in when people live out and drive in? You see more and more of than even now. People living out in this area driving all the way to Grand Rapids to work everyday, and they think nothing of it. You’re going to see more and more of that, I think, all along. Ottawa County is just growing by leaps and bounds. It’s both good and bad. It’s good as far as dollars are concerned. I don’t know what it’s going to do to the environment, to the historical value of West Michigan. But it’s inevitable. I don’t think it will be something you can stop. I don’t think you’d want to stop it, because towns like Holland and Zeeland are constantly throwing out incentives for more industry to come in. I understand Zeeland’s got more jobs available than they got people in town. So I think people have to come in from Grand Rapids, and Muskegon, and other areas in order to fill the jobs, which is really unusual for a town.

GR: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life?

BS: I think the war was a significant turning point in my life. I have to admit that in my
high school years, and even in my two years at Hope College before the war, I was pretty immature like most kids - carefree, no real sense of responsibility, no sense of loving and caring for others, primarily looking at your own benefits. The war, going into the service, is where you really grow up. The training they give you and the discipline that’s demanded, all these things force a person to mature and to grow up like you never would otherwise. In fact, I have always said, I really believe in universal military training. I would like to see every kid today as he comes out of high school go into the army for a year. I think it’s the best thing you could do for him.

(End of side one)

GR: Tell me about someone important who influenced or affected your life here, if any?

BS: In Holland?

GR: Yes.

BS: Well, it depends on which way you mean influenced. I mean, if you mean influenced to give you a desire or to strive harder in life, I would have to say my two uncles who owned the Dyke Construction Company were real models to me, although I was not real close to them. But when I saw the work they had completed in Holland, the jobs that they did, the beautiful homes that they lived in, which in my time were like mansions, and I thought, you know, they give you the sense that, if they could do it, and here they were neither one of them college graduates, but they did it through hard work. I would think, if they can do it, why can’t I do it? Of course, when you’re at that age, monetary things influence you more than anything else, that’s one of the
reasons I went into engineering, which in the later life I sometimes regretted. I went into engineering because I thought "big money." That's all I could see is dollar signs in front of my eyes. When my real love was music. If I would have stuck with it, I might have been happier. And yet, I didn't want to end up being just a band leader in a high school or something like that. Back in those days, those jobs were very poor paying, and I could see dollar signs in engineering. And yet, once I got out into industry, I really didn't like it all that well. I earned a good living - not like I thought I would. I found out that like in engineering, even to really get into the top money, you have to be a CEO or Plant Manager or something like that in order to do very well. I would say that my uncles in business here in Holland probably influenced me or gave me the desire to strive to get ahead, more for dollars than anything else. I was thinking of dollars rather than whether I would enjoy the job or not. I can remember once when I was in college, the head of our engineering department up there said, "When you take engineering or any kind of work that your considering for life, there are things you have to consider. For example, where am I going to live with this kind of a job?" I hadn't considered that, even something as simple as that. When you think, now when you get into engineering... there wasn't any engineering jobs in a place like Grand Haven or Holland. Really, I had offers in Pennsylvania in the steel mills, I had offers in Detroit in the automotive companies. I didn't want to live in Pennsylvania. I didn't want to live in Detroit. That wasn't my idea of living at all. So I settled for the next best thing. I lived in Grand Rapids, which was big enough to have some industry that required engineers and yet it was small enough that
I could enjoy life there and go to Holland and Lake Michigan. And so I sacrificed large earnings for a better lifestyle.

GR: Have your priorities changed over the course of your life here, or life in general?

BS: No, I don’t think so. Of course the older you get, the more you realize that collecting worldly trophies don’t mean that much. You’re not going to take it with you, that’s for sure. Be fortunate that you can share. I see that here in Freedom Village. It’s so nice when you get a bunch of people like this. You see something I never saw, or I wasn’t raised this way. For example, you see a lot of people here when they greet each other they don’t just say "hi," they greet each other with a hug or something like that. Now I wasn’t raised that way. In our family, hugging was something we never did, although I had wonderful parents. But I see some of these things now that have mellowed me and have given me a different perspective on relationships with other people. I strive more to be compassionate, loving, and things that, on my job as an engineer were not involved, and in my previous family life wasn’t all that involved either. Even my own children (chuckles), when I look back, I was so busy with this and that and everything else, sure I spent time with them, but don’t remember doing a lot of hugging or anything like that. It just wasn’t part of me. I wasn’t raised that way. But now I see that it should have been more part of my life.

GR: Has your commitment to faith gotten easier or harder through your life?

BS: Easier, because I can see the results. I have had answered prayer in my life many times. There are people who dispute that and say well these events would have happened anyway, but I don’t happen to believe that. I happen to believe that when I
saw things that I prayed for consistently transpire, I consider it to be answered prayer.

GR: One other topic that I hadn't asked you before: What is your viewpoint of bilingualism within the city of Holland in the schools for non-native...

BS: I don't like it. I don't like it at all. My wife is a native of Latvia. She suffered many years of oppression under the Russians and the Germans before she finally escaped and came to this country. Her first husband was killed over there during the war. She came over here with little boy, a son. Within one year, she was required to be self-supporting in every respect before she was even allowed into the country. She had to have all kinds of physicals and tests. She had to speak the language. Now I think that speak America or speak English in this country should be mandatory. I don't see any excuses for having bilingual classes in school or anything. I can see teaching people. If kids come here not understanding the English language, okay, we should have special classes for them. I agree with that. They should be taught. But I don't see having to have a whole lot of bilingual classes just because they are of a different nationality. I don't go along with that at all! No, I'll never believe that at all. I think that the language of this country is English and we should all be able to speak it. And I believe that very strongly.

GR: This is the end of the tape with the interview with Bill Stronks.