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Topp, Howard Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Larry Wagenaar

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LW: Could you state your full name and date of birth as we get started?

HT: Howard Melvin Topp, born [date removed], 1923.

LW: Where were you born?

HT: In Holland, 25 East Thirteenth Street.

LW: Did you grow up in that home?

HT: Yes, until high school and then the folks bought a house at Thirteenth and Van Raalte. I went into the Navy from there and came home.

LW: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Holland. Give me some impressions.

HT: It was unique in today's world because we walked from Thirteenth and Van Raalte to Boy Scout meetings on Ninth and Central and back home again after the meeting. We used to have some neat scout meetings with a lot of good singing...just a bunch of fun besides going to camp for a week in the summer. It was church-oriented. The Scout troop was in a church of which my family was not a member, but I knew a lot of people there. That's how I became acquainted in First Church where I met my wife. I was from the Pillar Church originally. And Reformed when I was married (laughs).

LW: Tell me about that dynamic. I want to talk about your growing up years—we'll come back to that in a minute. What was it like to have a "mixed marriage"? Was it considered such at that time?

HT: Not an awful lot, but a very serious talk with one of the elders of Pillar Church that I
was sure I wanted to do this. They thought it would be a lot better if I brought my wife to the Pillar Church. She influenced me to come to First. There was no animosity about the two churches or anything like that.

LW: You don't remember a tension between First and Pillar in the early years?

HT: No, it wasn't there any more by the time I was growing up. It may have been in my grandparents background, but they never talked about it. If they did, they talked about in Dutch which I couldn't understand.

LW: Did your parents speak fluent Dutch?

HT: No, but they could understand it. The only time they spoke Dutch was when they didn't want us to know what they were talking about, otherwise practically none. But my grandfather always prayed in Dutch.

LW: When did your grandfather immigrate?

HT: I'm not sure he immigrated. He had a farm two miles east of Drenthe where my mother and her sisters and brothers were born and moved to 78 East 17th Street in the early 19 teens, maybe close to 1920. Retired as a farmer. Did some work in a couple of hardware stores just to have something to do.

LW: What was his name?

HT: Henry A. Lanning. There are a lot Lannings in the Drenthe and Zeeland area.

LW: What about your father's side? What type of history was there?

HT: I never knew my dad's father because he passed away when I was two years old of a heart attack, I'm told. They lived on East 9th Street--one of those alleys off Lincoln Avenue there. My grandmother was a Barneveldt. I can remember going to that
house and the bed was this high off the ground from the floor that. I couldn't crawl on the bed. But I don't remember a whole lot about her outside of she was nice. She remarried, but I don't remember visiting there...maybe a Sunday visit or something like that.

LW: Where did you go to school?

HT: Holland Christian. Started on 15th and Central and high school on 19th and River and was graduated from there.

LW: What was it like to go through the Christian School system?

HT: I didn't know any different. I chummed around with a lot of kids from the public school and it wasn't a conflict thing. With our family either.

LW: As a member of the Reformed Church, were quite a few families in your church that went to...oh, you were in Pillar when you were growing up, weren't you?

HT: Yes. There were families that went to the public school from Pillar Church.

LW: From your point of view, tell me how Holland has changed over the last fifty years or longer.

HT: Of course, it's immensely larger. The feeling of security is kind of gone. The community is not a nucleus of everybody trusting everybody. You don't dare to leave your house without locking the door, maybe you do to work in the backyard, but not to leave for any period of time. I never had a key to my folks' house all the years I grew up there. The door was always open. Tulip Time was always a big thing as kids growing up. You got to be in a Dutch costume, you got to march in the school parade. Boy Scouts--you got to hold the crowds back on the parade route.
LW: Tulip Time was in its relative infancy during those years.

HT: Thirties. It was a big thing for our community. Celebrities coming in. Well advertised by Holland Furnace of course.

LW: Was Holland Furnace the major employer in town?

HT: It probably was as far as I remember. Though my father never worked for them.

LW: Who did your father work for?

HT: James A. Brouwer Furniture Store on 9th and River, and then in the late '20s he opened his own radio business on Washington Square, and was overextended when the Depression hit and lost it all. Then he came down with rheumatic arthritis, so to get out and get exercise, he used to walk peddling McNess Products--that's like Watkins and Raleigh--door to door. I used to go along when I first learned to drive. I'd go along and sit in the car for two hours just so I could drive another two blocks (laughs). But that was fun. I got into my dad's car which was parked in front of the house, and I just decided I was old enough to start it up and see if I could move it back three feet and forward three feet. Finally one day he said, "Why don't you put it in the garage?" And I did! (laughs) Which you couldn't do today!

LW: No. Other changes that come to mind that sort of strike you as you look back?

HT: I always thought the sugar beet factory was a fascination to see them run either horses and wagons or trucks, and then have that big lift empty the wagon or the truck out. I've always been fascinated...I can go to an airport and watch planes come and go and be entertained.

LW: Any important individuals or people that you knew in the community that you have
memories of? Stories of any kind?

HT: When my folks lived on East 13th Street and I was in high school, Don Rypma moved next door with his wife and daughter. He was in partnership with Bill Meengs at the Standard Oil Station on 16th and River. They each worked every other day—the two guys—and I came home from school at noon and then his wife would have a hot dinner. I would put it in my bicycle basket and wheel over to the station for him to have a hot meal at noon. And that such evolved and, "While you're here, do you want to check those guys tires once?" "Clean this windshield?" And I just got into it and I kind of learned to like it. I like to meet people. I worked for them a couple of years before I was graduated, and after I graduated they were open all night, so I worked from nine and night until seven in the morning.

LW: There was business during the middle of the night?

HT: Not much. Well, there was up until midnight, and then it was pretty...early morning hours. But that was the highway, River Avenue. The highway used to come in on the old Saugatuck Road and through Virginia Park and Central Park and 17th Street to River, and then turned left on River Avenue to 8th Street, or north on River to 31 to Grand Haven. I just decided I didn't like that night work. It was right after Pearl Harbor Day and I said, "I think I'll try something else." So I went to work at Bohn Aluminum and that was terrible. Machine shop. Every two weeks you'd change shifts. Work 8 to 4 for two weeks, and then go from 4 to midnight, and then midnight to 8. So every two weeks you'd have a different...And then being this terrible thing that happened with Pearl Harbor...they had security people at the gate
that had to squeeze your lunch before you went in and when you went out. It wasn't my idea of fun. So I worked long enough to have them pay for my physical before coming there and said this was enough. At that time, Don Rypma took over the Shell station at 15th and River, which was block away from 16th and River, and he came over to the house and said, "I'd like to have you work for me." Man, that was right up...because he and I thought a lot alike and we liked to have a clean place, neat and tidy. So I did that from '42 to '43 when I went into the Navy, and I stayed in the Navy until February of '46. Came back to work for Don Rypma, and then in the '60s he took me in as a partner. Then he was old enough to retire, and I was going to buy a station, it was a Gulf Station at 24th and State that's now Admiral. I had made the down payment, but I had a lawyer draw it up in case I wanted to back out so I could. I made a down payment on it, and then Vanden Berg Buick came over to the station before I got out of 15th and River, and they said, "Sure you want to stay in the service station business? We'd like to have you come to work for us. Write service. You like to meet people." That sounded pretty good, and for about half the hours I was putting in at the service station, which would be more if you owned it, I think. So I went to work for Vanden Berg Buick in '68, and I worked there until December of '86. Crown had bought Ter Haar-Venhuizen in May of '86 and they kept telling guys that drove cars, "If Howie Topp ever wants to move, we'd like to talk to him." Vanden Berg sold out in January of '86. Management, as far as I was concerned, was going down hill as far as running a nice store. So I went over and talked to them at Crown. "Yeah! When do you want to start?" (Laughs) So I started there in
December of 1986, and I've been with them ever since. I retired about four and a half years ago, but I go in three days a week and help them with the rush in the morning. Still see a lot of people I know like you and...

LW: (Laughs)

HT: In the afternoon or whenever I have free time, I have a little cubicle in the Honda showroom, and I call all the people that have had warranty work done and see if it's fixed and if they're happy with our service and any comments they have to make. People like it. Crown likes it. And I'm having a ball! (Laughs)

LW: So you were in the service station at the Shell place from '46 to '68? Is that right?

HT: Yes.

LW: And then you went to Vanden Berg for almost twenty years.

HT: 18 years.

LW: Then you went to Crown. What did you do for Vanden Berg? Were you a part of the service...

HT: Service writer.

LW: So work would come in and then...

HT: The guy comes in or calls and says, "I've got this noise or this problem with my car. It doesn't run or can't shift." Write it up and then farm the work out to a technician who was qualified to do that kind of work. Or lube, oil or filter or whatever they needed.

LW: You said management was starting to go downhill. How did that manifest itself?

HT: Well, you see, Vanden Berg sold out to a dealer from Grand Blanc, Ron Slivko, and
he had people that he thought were good managers come and manage Vanden Berg. But the cat wasn’t there and the mice did play, you know? The service just wasn’t like I wanted to see it run, like we had had it run, and it was more frustrating to go to work than enjoyable. That’s the way I felt about it toward the end.

LW: You just weren’t providing service...

HT: Yes, they weren’t treating customers the way I like to see them be treated. It wasn’t terrible that you hated to go to work, but it just wasn’t the way it used to be. Crown with Craig Wierda right from the top desk, "The customer gets treated right," and that makes it a fun place to work as far as I’m concerned.

LW: Having been in the service business for all your career, how has…. First tell me how cars have changed.

HT: Let me go back a little farther to service in the service station. We used to have a county nurse come in every Friday afternoon and she’d park by the air tower. She wouldn’t blow her horn or do a thing until you came out there and checked all four tires. Then she’d pull up to the pumps and fill up her gas tank, check her oil and radiator, clean her windshield and maybe all her windows. That’s unheard of today! It’s self service, and if you want your windshield cleaned, if they’ve got a sponge and a paper towel, maybe you can get it done. Or else, maybe an old dirty rag they’ll let you use to get the heavy off and make it greasier than it was when you got there. But when we had a following of customers, as their families grew up you knew where their kids were going to school, when they got married. They came in every week for gasoline. We had one guy that would come in on Saturday, fill up his tank and pay
for last Saturday's gas and charge today's (laughs) Year round! But in those days we
didn't even demand a signature. If they said, "charge it," we wrote their name on a
sales slip and put it in the cash register.

LW: And never had a problem?

HT: Never had a problem. That's one other thing, of all the years we were in the service
station, we charged to all kinds of people including the Spanish who were coming in
in the sixties. Never got beat by a Spanish person once! The one's that would charge
I mean to say. Never once did we have a bad account with them. And we had a lot
of Dutch (laughs)...

LW: Oh, you had a lot?...

HT: Well, not a lot but where we had tough collecting it was people that were brought up
in Holland, you know?

LW: Were they tough because they got in over their heads or they just were stubborn and
didn't want to pay?

HT: Well, I think it was poor management. Didn't know how to handle their money or
didn't know what to do with it when they had it. Instead of paying bills they would
go out and have a good time. That kind of thing.

LW: You were in the service station for twenty-two years it looks like, from '46 to '68,
right? Because you made the switch in '68 to Vanden Berg. How did that business
change over that twenty year period?

HT: There was more promoting of good service and selling more like tires and tune ups
and minor repairs got into the service...When I started in the service station, it was
just change the oil and lubricate the car. Then, because my partner and I thought alike, with every lubrication we'd sweep out the car, clean all the windows inside and out...That was the only thing the customer knew we did if he left his car in our service. He didn't know if you really greased it or changed his oil. But it paid off. We had a lot of good business. And probably we gave away more of our labor than we should have. We should have charged more too and would have had a better living out of it.

LW: But it supported both of you and the other partner too.

HT: I wasn't married then, of course. Well, yeah, I was too. When I came home from the service we were married in '47 so...

LW: Was the price of gasoline pretty constant during this period?

HT: Yeah. It kept edging up but it was never up to fifty cents a gallon.

LW: Started probably in the teens in the '40s...

HT: As I recall, when I came back from the service in '46, it was about 38 cents.

LW: Then it must have dropped down a little bit after the war?

HT: It would fluctuate.

LW: Were there a lot of premiums given away by the oil company to get people to come in?

HT: Not with major brands like Shell or Standard. Standard I started with in high school and we had Shell when I was in business. But there were a lot of good meetings on the quality of products like especially motor oil. Motor oil's quality came up fast after World War II.
LW: Were there any gas wars?

HT: If it was, it was done by the companies, not by the dealers. Most dealers, and we were included in that, rented the station from the oil company for so much a gallon or so many dollars a month, whichever way it was set up. You didn't have the total markup of the gallon of gas that you did if you owned your own place. Like today, I think a lot of these stations, they all buy their gas from Quality Oil on Ottawa Avenue and they have the tankers...Shell doesn't do that because Schmuckel Oil from Traverse City owns them and comes down here and fills their tank. But Standard and even Admiral, AC from Muskegon brings the gas into any one of those stations.

LW: Does Quality use other tankers to deliver to those stations?

HT: Yes, Brenner comes in and goes to Voss Boys and to Meijer's Thrifty Acres. I've seen their truck up there. I don't know about other stations in the outlying area. They strictly transport the fuel from a given terminal to whoever is buying it.

LW: And they charge a per gallon fee?

HT: Yeah.

LW: I know the markup on gasoline is pretty tight if I recall correctly.

HT: It always was when we were in it. If you paid two cents a gallon rent, and you had another three or three and a half to play with, you were pretty lucky.

LW: It made gas wars pretty costly if they did. Let's take off into some other areas.

HT: You said the change in cars...When I was in the service station it wasn't hard to see the spark plugs or to get at them or to change them or to do a tune-up. We bought a sun machine that could do a quality tune-up, put points in. Today there are no points,
there's no distributor, there are spark plug wires from a coil pack and spark plugs are still there, but you used to tune-up a car every, oh man, right after the war every 10,000 miles? Now they started in the '90s with 30,000 and now they're saying 50,000 between tune-ups. Even on the Cadillacs, 100,000 between spark plug changes because they put platinum tips on them. And the fact that fuel injection doesn't burn the spark plugs like the old carburetor-type engine did. Of course, you don't have a carburetor either. It's so much more electronics. You have a computer to run the emission system and there's several programmers that feed that computer the proper information. For instance, there's usually three grades of gasoline you can buy at any service station. The standard brand, the midgrade, and the super or supreme. Some people think that just because they've got a new car, they ought to put that high priced gasoline in it. It's the worst thing you could do because the computer says, "Man, this thing is running rich. We've got to cut back on that." and it'll make the car run worse than if it had the normal standard brand. Because the computer reads the octane and the emissions and all that stuff, and it says, "Man, this baby's burning rich. We've got to cut back." (Laughs)

**LW:** So you're actually counterproductive unless it's tuned to run on that type of fuel. Any other thoughts on how the service...the service station not necessarily, but your work in the automobile field. Has it changed? Any memories, stories?

**HT:** You sort of evolve in it, or it just transposes by itself. I can't think of anything spectacular to bring up. There's more and more power with every new car today. You used to have to crank down the windows. Now they are power windows. And
you've got power door locks, and you've got keyless entries and automatic transmissions which didn't start until about 1939. Front wheel drive. It used to be you could make a buck packing a set of front wheel bearings, but there's no packing bearings any more. It's all factory assembled and if one goes bad, you just replace the whole hub.

LW: So really there's less to service? There's more components, but there's less you can...

HT: Less that a technician can do to it. I was never a technician that tore up the inside of an engine. Tune up, fan belts, brakes, exhaust, but nothing like a valve grind or new piston rings or new bearings. I never got into that part of that until I...I didn't get into doing it but I saw it happen when I went to work at Vanden Berg's. There aren't too many engines today that are overhauled. If an engine goes bad today, they usually replace it with a factory rebuilt engine.

LW: Because it's just not worth the time...

HT: Too much time and a technician probably doesn't have all the instruments to test tolerances, bearing clearance, and wrist pin fit and...

LW: Because it's so tight these days.

HT: Yeah. It's much better to have one done at the factory. And they guarantee it for 12,000 miles or a year, so it could be an expensive undertaking if you tried to do that on your own. Then, too, you figure that technician's going to be tied up for two days or three on that engine rebuild, and you could probably have him do tune-ups or repair a door lock or a window motor, and satisfy a whole larger number of
customers and be just as productive as he would be...

LW: Probably make more money on it.

HT: He could well make more money on it. On an engine overhaul, there's a nice...the technician gets paid so much an hour for the hours that it takes to overhaul, whether it takes him more than that or he could do it quicker if he's got power tools and stuff like that. But there's a nice markup for the garage on parts. So it's worthwhile to do.

LW: This is just a personal question because I had one of these...it doesn't relate to Holland or anything. Tell me about the diesel fiasco that GM had in the '80s.

HT: They first of all had a fellow that designed a diesel engine by modifying the old Olds Rocket V-8 engine--the heavier cylinder walls but the basic design of the engine was the same. It was a whole lot heavier, and noisier, and as far as I'm concerned there isn't a clean smelling diesel made. But then, that's my opinion. Bill Vanden Berg had a 1980 Buick Park Avenue diesel, and you could buy diesel fuel for then about 19 or 20 cents a gallon compared to forty-some cents to fifty cents a gallon for gasoline, and so he kept a ledger on it. But the diesel engine cost about four to five hundred dollars more than the gasoline engine. In the same car equipped with the same bells and whistles. So he kept track of it--what he spent for fuel and how much he saved. He figured out that you had to drive it pretty near 30,000 miles just to break even for the difference in price. Then those diesels engines weren't all that well constructed, and they stood back of them way past their warranty on it. If you had a diesel engine and it went bad and it was a GM diesel, they'd put in a new one for just the cost of
the engine or just the labor or split it with you fifty-fifty. But they wanted to keep
you as a customer. The people who had them were quite well satisfied with them
until the price of diesel fuel started to match gasoline. Then there was no more
competition to have a diesel.

LW: There wasn't any incentive. Let's move away from cars for a little bit. Describe the
role that the church has played in your life.

HT: I was always taken to church as a youngster. I can remember tipping over the
collection plate in the back of the church one day and having all the coins go rolling
all over the floor. I was always sent to Sunday School and to catechism. I wasn't
always impressed with that, but along with a Christian school education, it started to
make sense pretty early in my life. And I'm thankful for having it. Like this
sesquicentennial thing too...I was brought up in the Pillar Church--maybe I said that--
and then Reformed when I was married. But we kind of healed that. There were a
few people that..."Well, we're really the first church," you know. In fact, I don't
know if you know that plaque of Van Raalte in the Pillar Church? If you get up there
real close, you can see a bullet hole in that thing. I was just told that a year ago,
maybe a year and a half ago.

LW: Do you know the story behind that?

HT: No, I don't know that.

LW: I don't know either.

HT: So church has always been important. We were married in the church, and we knew
that we wanted to go to church as a family. When we had children, we wanted to
bring them up in church, although my wife went to the public schools and our two
cchildren are graduates of Holland High. They didn't go to the Christian school. But
now our granddaughters are going to Christian school.

LW: Was it a difficult choice or was it an easy choice?

HT: It wasn't tough because public schools...there weren't the outside influences that there
are today of different nationalities. There weren't drugs being peddled on the streets.

LW: What's driving your children making the decision to send their kids to the Christian
school?

HT: One is they see the value of it. And their father is a graduate of Holland Christian
which was maybe the half way tipping it in that direction. But I think they feel that
the quality of the education could be just a little better in the Christian school. My
wife worked in the library there for twenty years, so I can't be too...I don't mean to
be either, down on the public schools, but I do think the quality of education changes.
In fact, they see that in the state of Michigan. Some of these teachers get tenure and
they've got a slow student, "Well, we'll pass him anyway, even if he can't read, into
the next grade." At our church, we are involved now with this Kids Hope thing
where we have volunteers that spend an hour a week with a second grader that's
having trouble with reading or math or counting sticks...and I don't know if that
happens in public education any more where a student that needs a little extra boost
gets it. It may, but it doesn't happen in every school.

LW: Diversity, as far as its ethnic makeup, has been increasing in the last number of years
as you know. What effect does that have on the community from your point of view?
HT: Before I was married, we had a nice Spanish family that lived across the street from us on West 13th Street. Gonzales. He worked for Heinz, and the kids were all well-behaved. There was no partying or anything like that. But it seems like the more of them that came to Holland--and maybe the whites have done the same thing--it seems like after World War II, partying was pretty important on weekends. Noise, loud music. It shows my age, but those are the kinds of things that affect me as far as it's being a nice community. I can much rather hear a good soprano or soloist with a piano in church give an hour concert, than I can hear one of these amplifying systems with four speakers up front and each one with a mike in their nose. The beauty of the music leaves after it gets so loud, as far as I'm concerned.

LW: Other things that are of aspect of the cultural diversity that's increased? You mentioned music and parties...

HT: I'm sure that some of our old clean white Dutch people got involved in drugs in Vietnam and maybe even in Korea, but it seems like there's an awful lot of that kind of merchandise coming from the south. Spanish, maybe. Even with others from the Texas-Mexico-New Mexico area. I don't know. When you read of an arrest or a charge made, somebody found with drugs in their vehicle, they were coming up to Holland from Texas or from wherever. Florida I guess is a big state to transport drugs through also.

LW: How has the role of women changed in Holland over the past several decades?

HT: They have more voice in government, in church government. And they're recognized as a person, not just as a wife. I think more women have gone into careers which
they never had a chance when my mother was growing up. She worked in the Holland Furnace office until she was married, but never went back to anything like that.

LW: Once you were married, you were expected to be home and raising a family.

HT: Take care of your kids.

LW: Recently Holland was named an All-America City as you know. And I know you don't know the inner workings of how that occurred, but from your point of view, what kinds of things gave the community the edge to get that kind of award?

HT: I think by recognizing the other nationalities besides the Dutch, because we were pretty prominently Dutch until World War II, and working with those people—learning their culture and letting them be part of ours.

LW: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland? And how did they affect the community?

HT: I'm not much looking for controversy (laughs).

LW: There've been a few, I'm sure, over the course of the years. I'll let that one brew in the back of your head and we'll come back to it. What kind of role does Hope College play in the community, from your point of view?

HT: Great role, good role, important role. And I think it's a financial benefit to the community, whether everybody wants to admit that or not, but I really feel they are. There are a lot of dollars brought into Holland because of Hope College.

LW: Through the students and the staff.

HT: And even the parents when they come for weekends or bringing the kids to Holland.
They've got to stay here a couple of nights. It's an extra fee for a room and meals.
And gasoline (laughter).

LW: You noticed it when things happened in town, didn't you?

HT: That's right.

LW: Did the price of gas go up at certain times, just naturally, like Tulip Time?

HT: No, we never did. Now maybe some did. It used to be quite prevalent among eating places that the prices would go up. Or they would have a Tulip Time menu that had only their best meals on it. They didn't have the Blue Plate Special or anything like that. When we were at 15th and River, and that was the highway, it was bumper to bumper coming in on that last Saturday and it was bumper to bumper leaving. So if somebody needed gas, they hardly dared pull out of line unless it was really desperate. Another thing that we enjoyed was keeping clean rest rooms. We had people come from Indiana and Illinois always stopped on Friday night on the way to their cottage because they knew they'd have a clean rest room to use.

LW: I can imagine. I've seen some of the ones that aren't (laughs), so I know what you're talking about. Do you think there's a perceivable generation gap in Holland?

HT: I don't know. Sure, there is as far as tastes of what you'd like for entertainment. For music on WHTC if you want to listen to the local station. I just walked from the parking lot here and a couple of students came by and both of them spoke to me which I thought was unique. Because that isn't always the case. Now, I'm not always on the campus, but I mean going down the street. If it's just two of us, I'm usually the first one to speak. These two guys just, "Hello. How're you doing?" It
was nothing elaborate but just a comment. I thought it was a nice gesture. And I like to do that myself. If I see a stranger in church, I say, "I don't know your name and you don't know mine, but we ought to find that out." I like to do that. I've got a nine-year-old and a four and a half year old granddaughters, and I'm not as wild about all the videos that they watch or what's channel 5? Nickelodeon. But we can converse. We can talk. And we can play games together yet, which is kind of neat, I think.

LW: Sure. Some of the traditions in Holland that have changed. One of them I'm aware of is the shopping tradition. Wasn't it always when you were younger a tradition to go shopping on a certain night of the week? Was it Saturday night?

HT: Saturday night was the night the stores were open downtown.

LW: Were open late.

HT: Yeah. And if there was something to look for in new clothing for the kids, that was the night the family took you down. But I can remember being sent from 13th between Central and College to Lincoln and 13th to the meat market there to pick up a pound and a half of "half and half" so my mother could make pig in the blankets. (Laughs). Half beef and half pork. I think that was the same combination for meat loaf. I'm not sure.

LW: Pig in the blankets. Now there's a Dutch cuisine! (Laughs) How has downtown changed?

HT: When I grew up, I knew most of the merchants who like Kuite's Market--there's still a label above the store there. Fris' Bookstore and Brinks Bookstore, Rose Cloak and
French Cloak, Lokker-Rutgers, Nees Hardware and Vogelzang Hardware. I think we've come a long way around. It was kind of... going into Ace Hardware and True Values, and of course the malls have brought in chains of clothing and stuff like that. But I still enjoy going to a merchant I know and even paying a few bucks more and being satisfied how I was treated, as to go to a cash register and say, "Here, I'd like to pay for this."

LW: Do you do most of your shopping downtown? Or do you go to the mall?

HT: Yes. My wife and kids are at the mall, but if I can find it downtown I'll find it downtown. And of course, I don't care to shop. I know what I want and if they have it, I'll buy it, and if they don't have it, I'll ask them when it's going to be there, if it's going to be there.

LW: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed over the past fifty years?

HT: Oh, I would think so. Here again, I think so because of the diversity in nationalities or background of the people we've imported because we are fortunate to have that kind of economic business going on in Holland that demands labor. It's fun to grow, but sometimes growing isn't all fun.

LW: So you think there's been a underside or a downside to the growth?

HT: Yeah. I think you import the type of people that aren't always desirable. Maybe we can as a somewhat Dutch influence but at least influential people help some of these people over their problems if they're willing to want to be helped. I'm certainly not going to go up to somebody whose having a party and is...
HT: ...and I'd like to have some help with it. Could you give me just a point in the right direction? Then I'd be more than willing to do it.

LW: How have Sunday practices changed?

HT: When I grew up as a kid, it was pretty near bad news to even listen to a baseball game on Sunday. But now that's very normal. If you're at a campground or something, it's nothing at all to play a game of softball or tennis or whatever is going on in the campground. It wasn't even such a good idea to go to the beach on Sunday when I was growing up.

LW: How do you feel about those changes?

HT: I don't think they're all bad. Because I don't think God is that small that He says you've got to live within...Like even when Jesus was accused of healing a man on the Sabbath, He said, "My father works every day." I think we were pretty straitlaced in the Dutch tradition there and that was handed down for a few generations. I marvel at Van Raalte even wanting to settle here, but he was given a lot of grace too to make it work. And they had a lot of perseverance to make it work. So from their success, they looked to the way they believed, I think, for their success.

LW: That's true. Can you describe a significant turning point in your life?

HT: Probably when I was married. Although I always had something to do, and it was never tear something up or see what you could wreck. I guess the worst thing I did was the first bicycle I had. I wore out the back tire by dragging the brakes in the first two weeks that I owned it. (laughs)
LW: Dad probably wasn't too happy about that, was he?

HT: No. (Laughter)

LW: How about someone who has been important or who has influenced your life?

HT: My partner, Don Rypma, was twenty years older than I was. My dad had suffered a stroke when I came out of the Navy, and so I could talk with him a lot and we worked together, so it was easy. He made a lot of contributions to my way of thinking.

LW: Have your priorities changed over the course of your life?

HT: No, not really. To have a job and be able to earn a living and to be happy in what you're doing. I'd hate to have the best paying job in the world and hate to go to work every morning.

LW: There are a few people who are in that position.

HT: Yes, there are.

LW: How do you feel about Tulip Time?

HT: I like it. I think it's good for the community. So you put up with the crowd for a few days, but if you wanted to see something in Chicago, you'd put up with a bigger crowd than this! It's no inconvenience for me to have Tulip Time. I plan ahead and wait until it's over if there's conflict. But I'm for it. I'd hate to see us give it up.

LW: How about bilingual education in the schools?

HT: You read so much about that. I really think that if the Spanish people wanted to learn in the schools where they have thrown out the bilingual, their grades have improved. If you read in the Reader's Digest about some of these areas out west where they've
taken out the bilingual education and the kids have progressed. When all the
immigrants came to America in the 1800s, 1700s, they didn't all speak English. They
didn't all speak German. They didn't all speak Irish or... "We came to America so
we're going to learn to speak American," and that's the way I'd like to see it. To me,
if you have to have bilingual education, you're taking away some of the time for
teaching. Because if you're bilingual, you've got to explain to the other language, be
it Spanish or whatever, it's usually Spanish, what you're saying in English. And
while you're talking to them, the English students aren't learning anything new.
Now, granted, there's times when they've got to do their own studying, but it's just
an aside.

LW: Assessment on city government?

HT: I don't think we could have a more community promoting mayor than we have. I'm
happy with our council government and our city manager. I think for our town it's
working well. You look at Zeeland and the mayor and the city manager didn't get
along even nine months and he was gone. So it's undoubtedly a personality thing too,
but I think it's the right...A mayor hasn't got the time...well, Al is unusual the time
he's got now that he's retired. But the average working man that wants to be in city
politics, doesn't have the time to study all the ramifications that are necessary, which
the manager then can do, and make sensible recommendations to the council.

LW: Do you know what the story was in Zeeland? I don't think it really has been
revealed.

HT: No, I don't think it has. You know Al Kleis...that's his brother-in-law who is the
mayor of Zeeland. And Hooglund...it's kind of got to go his own way, I think. I don't know whether that was it. I would just guess that if the manager did something that Les didn't think was right, he wouldn't be very quiet about it. That's a guess. Now, I don't know. I have no first hand knowledge of what the problem was.

LW: Just as we close, a few of the hotter topics that have been in the news lately. What are your feelings on the new area center?

HT: I think it would be beautiful. But I don't know how much we can put on the fork as far as taxation is concerned. You know we just voted for the school, library, city hall. We've put a whole lot on the fork, and like I say, I'm not against it, but you've got to look at the average John Q. Public whether he can stand that kind of additional load.

LW: The mill rate in the City of Holland is something like 34 point something and the townships is almost 12 points lower. I know there is probably some concern about additional mills.

HT: There should be.

LW: And finally, the Windmill Island concept.

HT: Well, there again--I've nothing against it, but I don't think it ought to be tax dollars that put in sewer and water for that conception. If we can generate enough business from outside of Holland by having a Dutch village built there and enough people with the means to buy a lot there and build a home there, I have nothing against it. But I don't think it ought to be another tax burden.

LW: Other thoughts? I've pretty much come to the end of my...
HT: I appreciate your time. I thought about this for six months, I was going to come and
do this. Finally when I read that you had 150, I thought I better call and see if you
still wants any more!

LW: (Laughs) We're at about 165, and we've had two done, including yours, in the last
two days. We are pretty much done with the project though, but if people do come
up, we are still doing them.

HT: I came in here with the idea of talking about service stations and we haven't talked
about that at all. I don't know if you want any of that history.

LW: Let's go into that.

HT: When I was out of high school, there was a service station...starting in the center of
town. There was one on the southeast corner of 16th and River, the northeast corner
of 16th and River, and the southeast corner of 15th and River. And there was a little
tiny one in between the two on 15th and 16th. There was a service station on 11th
Street and River Avenue where Reliable's parking lot is now. There was another
service station--two of them at 7th and River because 31 went north on River Avenue.
A Mobil station on the southeast corner which was DeVries and Kelton, and a little
Shell station which is now the Youth for Christ but it was B. F. Goodrich's store until
they moved out. Then you could go down Eighth Street and where that indentation is
beyond Vogelzang's yard, there's a store--is that where Gordon Van Wylen is now?

LW: Yeah. That's where Riverview is, and there's a bookstore there.

HT: That was Downtown Service. It was a big gas station and wrecker service. Then you
went to Columbia and Eighth and there was a Standard station on the northwest, a
Puroil station on the northeast, and a Texaco station on the southeast. Then you went down Eighth Street, and I'm not sure exactly what street it was on, but there was a station that was Youkam Woldring's station. Maybe you heard the story about Youkam. He was always a character. He had afterwards built that station on Chicago Drive past Russ' where the bus station was and it's still a convenience store I guess. Then you could go up Michigan Avenue and there was a service station on 27th and Michigan, and where Clark is, that was a grocery store, but there was a station where the Gusher is. There was a station where Ray's Tire is on the point, and on the northeast corner of 32nd and Michigan--and Washington then, Washington joins there-there was a station. Across on the southeast corner there was a station and up a block was a Gulf station. Way to the top of the hill where that tool rental service is, that was a station. Down the old Blue Star Highway, if you could go straight on it where... You remember where Prince had his radio antenna up there? It was kind of a triangular piece. Anyway, that was a station. That was run by Mike Sale and his partner, Al Petroelje. They built new stations in Holland, and Al Petroelje had 32nd and Michigan and Mike Sale had 32nd and Lincoln. Then there was a station on 24th and State where Gulf is, and then across 24th where OK Tire is that was a big station of Hank and Case Bouwman. Texaco. And then you went up Lincoln Avenue and where the Voss Boys is, and then you could go out 17th Street from River and there was a station at 17th and Pine where the transmission shop is now. On Washington and 17th where that little insurance office is that was a one-bay station. Three pumps. Then you went farther west and originally on the south side of the road was
Helmink's station. I don't even know what brand. Do you know Cece Helmink at all? His dad had a station there. Then you could go out South Shore Drive and there was a station right where the Parkway Lunch Room is now. Around the corner there was another station and you get to 32nd Street and that Windmill Station is still there. Of course, that was a highway then. There was a station where that real estate office is across from Repcolite on the north side of 17th Street, plus there was a station right on the point where 16th and 17th come together. I missed one on Eighth Street. There was a big Gulf Station where Verhage is. And of course that's where M-21 came in.

LW: Wasn't there a service station at the Civic Center?

HT: Across from the Civic Center where that Spanish eating place is, and of course H and B is still a repair shop across from the Civic Center parking lot. And that old Plymouth-DeSoto garage—-it was a Goodwill store? I think that's still up.

LW: It was a Salvation Army, wasn't it? They moved recently.

HT: Yeah. Then behind the Gulf Station on 16th and River, before World War II was DeSoto-Plymouth and then became Packard, and at one time Packard was on Central Avenue between Eighth and Ninth where the back end of AlpenRose is. Under the bowling alley there was a station on the corner there. The bowling alley was all upstairs and there was a station and a couple of offices and a garage to park cars in. Then behind the museum on Ninth and River, that was Decker's Chevrolet before it was DeNooyer's Chevrolet. Before it was Decker's Chevrolet, there was a drive-through underneath the corner of that building with gasoline pumps. Then going
north on River Avenue, there was one on Second street and River on the east side and on the west side was Pelon's Sunoco. It's a car lot now. That was a station. You go across the bridge and on the right was Schuilings and get to Lakewood Avenue and River Avenue there was Fynewever's Standard on that side. I don't know who was on this side any more. Then you go out Lakewood Blvd. and you get to 152nd, which is the road going west and you turn left to go south, and right on that corner was a Standard station.

LW: 152nd and Lakewood?

HT: There's a house there now.

LW: I never knew there was a station out there.

HT: That was before World War II. That's the concentrate that I can remember. I could maybe drive by and remember some more. Like you used to, you can still take the lake road north of Butternut Drive and go toward Consumer's Power. There used to be a little station on the left there. It's all torn down. Just the house is still there. My old partner, Don Rypma, bought it. The guy and his wife had no relatives and no survivors. They never had any kids. I think they had a relative in England or somewhere in Europe, and they agreed to sell it. So he bought the whole thing. It was quite a nice piece of property on both sides of the road.

LW: Was there much dialogue among the dealers?

HT: Yeah. We used to have a retail gasoline dealers association. I wasn't part of the business then, but Don Rypma would go and they'd try to work out something about hours that they wanted to stay open and things like that. But this Youkam Woldring
would never do anything that the rest of them would. He was just his own man and
that's the way it was going to be.

LW: What kinds of things did he do that people noticed?

HT: We were talking about it at the luncheon this noon. They always said that he and
Harm Van Ark...do you know the schoolteacher, what's his name, Van Ark that lives
on 27th and College? Myron Van Ark. It was his uncle. They'd come to the Civic
Center and one would be there earlier. Harm usually was there earlier. He'd always
be sitting in the bleachers right near the doorway, and he'd always say, "TOOT-
TOOT!" And the whole Civic Center could hear it you know. Youkam Woldring
would come in and sit next to him and there'd be a free throw coming up and
Youkam would say, "Now shoot that the way I trained you!" (laughter) He was
always liking to be a little controversial. If you wanted to charge a quarter for a quart
of oil, "Well, I think I'll charge 23 cents." (Laughter) And that kind of thing you
know.

LW: A real competitive person.

HT: Yeah.

LW: Well, thanks for taking time to talk to me today.

HT: I'm glad you listened because I feel if you don't get some of this down it will just
evaporate. Like service stations too. It used to be always, "Clean the windshield,
check the oil, make change, charge," whatever they wanted to do. But you knew
when their kids were through grade school and through high school and where they
were going to college, when they got married. It was a fun thing to be involved with
other people that way.

LW: It's very hard pressed to find a station like that in this day and age.

HT: Today you can't. That's right.

LW: I can't think of hardly any in the city. Maybe a couple in Zeeland yet but...

HT: I guess you can get full service at the car wash on East Eighth Street and you pay for it. Like ten cents more a gallon.

LW: Yeah, you're right. You can.

HT: It used to be that the Shell on 15th and River did that. Let me tell you about that.

When my partner took over the Shell station, before I went into the Navy and then I came back, they decided to build a new station there in 1968, or '67 and they finished it in '68. They built a big three-bay station. We were only there two months and it cost us twice as much to run the electricity for all the lights and everything. And then they wanted another $200 a month for the third bay. Plus your ordinary monthly rental.

LW: (Laughter) So is that why you got out?

HT: I figured the business that we generated for Shell in the years we've been here has more than paid for this new station. You think you have to have the cream off the top of the quart of milk before we can get anything else? You're wrong. I'm not scratching gravel just for Shell Oil.

(end of interview)