Van Faasen, Paul Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Paul Van Faasen

Conducted June 16, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
AP: The first thing I need you to do is state your name for the tape and when and where you were born.

PVF: I'm Paul Van Faasen, I was born here in Holland on [date removed], 1934.

AP: Have you stayed here all your life or have you lived in other places for any period of time?

PVF: Primarily here, but we lived in northern Illinois where I taught at Lake Forest College for a year, and there are a couple of army years and graduate school years when we were out of town, but, primarily, we centered on Holland.

AP: Could you trace where you went to school from grade school straight through.

PVF: We lived in a of couple different places, but we moved to the last block of West 13th Street west of Van Raalte Avenue, so I was sort of a dead-end kid, when I was about four. Went through Holland Christian School System through the, as we called it, wooden building on Central Avenue near 15th Street, which burned down later on. Then through the brick building on 15th Street, which is now apartments, on to the high school. I graduated from high school in 1952, then went to Hope College, graduated from Hope in 1956 with a major in chemistry and a minor in biology, worked for a year at Park-Davis, as a chemist. Then I got drafted and spent two years in the army, one year of it in Virginia and one year of it in Maryland. I came back and went to graduate school at Michigan State through the master's, taught at
Lake Forest College for a year. Finally, in 1963, I came back here to Hope. We were here for three years, and then off for about two and a half years to work on a PhD at Michigan State, and then came back here.

AP: Could you describe the process of deciding where to go to college? Was that such a big process it seems to be now?

PVF: No, it was just natural. We've talked about that, and I think the main reason I went to college was because I graduated from high school. The convenient one was Hope, and so I came to Hope. It had a good reputation anyway. No, I didn't go searching for colleges.

AP: Was that a natural step for most kids in your class graduating, to go on to college at that time?

PVF: No, I think not. We were around 115 students, and I think four or five of us came to Hope, and probably 15 or 20 may have gone to Calvin. So, I think the minority of students were going to college at that time in 1952.

AP: What size was the school?

PVF: It was around 900 students.

AP: What was that like when you compare it to the students you're teaching now.

PVF: Actually, there is considerable similarity in student attitudes. They're just, sort of, we're there, and we usually went to class, and never got into major trouble, and did what it was we were supposed to do. We were not involved in politics. We weren't involved in community life, we weren't involved in a lot of kind of things. I see that in students today. They're just sort of disinterested in the world, as opposed to the
activist 60s, and some more of that in the 70s.

AP: Do you think that cycles?

PVF: Probably. I'm not old enough to know that. (laughs) But this one seems to have.

AP: What was it like coming back and teaching at the school you went to?

PVF: It was kind of scary. We talked about it a long time, as to whether or not to come back. But I'd been out for seven years what with working, in the army, and graduate school, and teaching at Lake Forest. So we decided we were long enough away that it wasn't like coming right back. There were folks that were well-known faculty, sort of feared faculty, when I was a student, who you called by first name. That was kind of strange. But they were all very generous, and I was well accepted, so it was a good move for us.

AP: So the transition from mentor to peer, within the faculty, did they make that pretty easy for you?

PVF: They made it pretty easy, yes.

AP: Let's just talk some more about significant changes to Hope, the community, Holland, the area... Since you've come back and started your professional career, what are the biggest changes you have noticed?

PVF: When I think back to when I was a student, and things had changed some when we came back here because we had been through the Korean War and some activism was beginning a little bit, I think. So there was a slight change in student attitude. When we arrived in '63, things were pretty quiet and pretty docile. Before very long, there was the Kennedy assassination, which really shook things up. The campus became a
little bit more aware. I think, mainly, one of the big things is the size difference. When you’re small, you know a lot of people. When you get to be 2,700, you know fewer people. I think that’s one of the big changes, although I know a lot of students because I’ve taught in intro courses. The campus is much larger. All those kinds of things happen with growth, and I think that’s pretty good. The change in faculty—when I was hired in biology, there was one prof doing a small amount of research. Where as now, one of the important things that we ask the candidate for the position is, "What kind of research do you do? Give a seminar, describe the things you’ve done." There has been a change in the amount of time the faculty spends teaching versus other kinds of activities, including research. In 1963, there were not very many forms to fill out, paper work to deal with, regulations and all of that. There’s an enormous amount of stuff like that now. A chairperson in 1963 had a relatively easy job, a chairperson now is a gopher, and does an enormous amount of that kind of stuff. So I think there’s also that kind of change. The faculty has changed from being largely pure teachers, to becoming more involved in their professions. This is good because people are current with the science. And with other things. There’s not just science doing research, there is research all over campus, more activities all over campus.

AP: A lot of people are writing books, text books and literary…

PVF: Yes, there are text books, there are more papers, there’s poetry being published, and there are more recitals, there are artists exhibiting, and just the whole campus is more involved in being professional. I think that keeps people current, it keeps them
thinking actively, and prevents them from going stale.

AP: I think it benefits the students a lot, too, from the other end. Through your professors, you get to know the professional world and how they operate in it and get a better understanding of it, as well as being exposed to the work they’re doing.

PVF: I think so. We get students involved in research early, in a real life situation, and it’s good for them. I had two students one summer, a number of years ago. One student ended up getting a paper published in an international journal, and decided that she really was not going to do research. She got out of biology and did something different. Another person spent time out in the field, and he decided that he really liked this, he was not going to have an indoor job because he really liked being outside. Well, he’s a bank vice-president now. So, it gives students a real life opportunity that wasn’t available when I was a student. I remember a prof who had pretty old, yellow notes. He can’t do that anymore, things move too rapidly.

AP: What kind of things would you concentrate on in an intro biology course, like a core course.

PVF: We try to hit the major areas in biology, but we’re changing our intro course right now, to go from a two semester fairly broad, superficial survey, to, it’s really a four semester block. We had the two semester intro and then four area courses after that. So we really prescribed pushing twenty-four hours of that major. Now we’re going to have sixteen hours with four courses in those four areas. I think those four areas haven’t changed a lot. One is diversity, one is physiology, one is cell, one’s ecology/evolution, and those are four really important areas that we need to cover in
bio. Those will be our four new core courses.

AP: How has the curriculum changed?

PVF: Not a whole lot. We've put in more requirements for graduation. There weren't nearly so many requirements when I was a student. I don't really remember what the requirements were, but I know there were relatively few when I was a student. There was some kind of government, social science requirement. One could get away without taking a philosophy course. So I never took a philosophy course. I liked psychology and government. I never took a history course because I had learned to hate history from high school. I've since learned that history is really fascinating.

AP: Really! Now you can't get away with that. You have to take at least one philosophy and one history, if not two.

PVF: Some of that distribution has changed, and maybe the total number of hours required for core have changed. But you had to take some science, and some social science. There was no arts requirement at that time, which was unfortunate. Of course, there was not the facility, either. Theater and art were on the fourth floor of Lubbers Hall, they shared it. (laughs)

AP: Where that little lounge is now? Is that why all the costumes are kept in there? There are a bunch of dance department costumes in Lubbers.

PVF: Well, basically, they had no facilities, so there was no possibilities of a large number of students taking theater or art. I don't think they had a painter. Oh, yes, they did.

AP: What do you think of the recent changes in core?

PVF: I think, by and large, it's going to be OK. I think it's too restrictive, like I think the
old core was too restrictive. I'm kind of a rebel in that area. I think that as soon as you name a course... I think that this is one of the good things about the bio requirement: there's a science requirement, and they don't name bio 100. So, bio 100 has to compete in quality with all the other science courses, to draw students. I think as soon as you name a course as a requirement, there's an inclination to not be as competitive as you might be, stay as current, be as good as you can be. You know that every year that 600 freshman... I don't want to pick on any course. But health dy or history or English 113 or whatever, you know that there's 600 freshman going to come through. You don't have to work as hard. I'm not saying that they don't. But when you name a course... I would, myself, rather see a core saying, you've got to have eight or ten hours of science, you've got to have eight or ten hours in English, literature, philosophy, you've got to have eight or ten hours in history, political science... Name some areas, and then let the student chose.

AP: Now, it's like, you can take this or this number, you can take ancient or modern, but you have to take two ancient, two modern. Some people, they'll accidently take a different, or they wanted a different prof, and then they'll have mixed up what they needed, and then they have to take an extra class.

PVF: It's like a Chinese menu.

AP: But I know that a lot of my friends looking at the schedule that are not really science oriented, but they know they have to take it, and all those little two credit classes, they're always excited to take astronomy or science of everyday objects. They're really excited to get something a little different than just the blanket course. That's
what they took in high school and didn’t like.

PVF: I think that part of it’s good. I think bio 100 is pretty successful because we’ve changed it a lot, and made the lab more investigative, but it is a lot of repeat of what you’ve had in high school biology. We do it at a different level, we try to do it differently, but there’s a danger in that. There are some things like, I think that some of the requirements are going to result in unanticipated demands on faculty and on students, and it’s possible that it could be a scheduling problem, limiting the size of the courses. This is the thing that hasn’t been ironed out yet. They call it a course, and what is a four hour course? Is it like bio 100 with 96 students in a lab that meets as much as it does? Or is a four hour course an English class with 18 students in it that’s going to meet three times a week. There’s going to be a fairness question that has to be dealt with.

AP: Some of us are kind of upset because it cuts down the number of different courses we can take, because, instead of five different classes, I can take four classes. Or, for instance, I’ve been involved in the dance department, and they’ve been wanting to change over three credit classes to four credits and change one credit ones. We’re like, no you can’t do that. We have to take 50 credits for our major, and we have to keep taking technique, and we need it down to one credit because we need to keep fitting it into our schedule. So I think they’ve been trying to change their curriculum over, and the departments saying, you cannot do it. So they’ve been struggling with that.

PVF: It’s going to be a problem in dropping a course, because it will be extremely difficult
to make up a four hour course. You can do one in May, but if you get a bit behind, you have some major troubles doing that.

AP: If you do want to add a dance class or intro to piano or something like that, you’re pushing it over to 17 and 18 credits, and you have to pay for that. But to drop it back down to thirteen or fourteen, you need to take more than that. You’re taking exactly four, four hour classes. All those little things people want to pick up...

PVF: I think there’s some argument for reducing the number of classes, but one of the reasons I left Lake Forest College was I got a job offer here. (laughs) But the curriculum there was very restrictive. They were on terms. It was a three/three system, so you took three courses each term, you needed 36 courses to graduate. It meant you worked on only three things at a time in that term, but you had very, very little flexibility. There was another botanist there, and there wasn’t really a chance for me to do the things I wanted to do in that department because of the restrictive nature of the curriculum. Unfortunately, if I had stayed, the other botanist had left after a year or so... But I think they still have the restrictive curriculum, and I like more flexibility. I like, if you want to do it, why not take 18 hours? On a four/four system, you can’t do that. I think there are going to be some logistical problems that need dealing with. They talk about half courses, but if you’re going to have half course, then why change?

AP: I actually had to do that because they switched over my major curriculum. It was a little inconvenient. It was a literature course, and we could have halved it for a semester, but the point was they had switched it over and I had taken different classes
that covered different parts of the course. Well, if I take the first half, I’m going to repeat, or if I take the last class… I ended up working out with her that I could pick and chose certain days, but the second she gets off the schedule… It was difficult.

PVF: For us in the sciences, where students take research for credit, or special problems, four hours is too big. We never let our students, except the most experienced students, ever take more than two hours of research at a time. We figure that, sixteen hours, you ought to spend forty hours a week. If you take a four hour course, that’s ten hours a week you need to spend on that, and that’s just too much time to do that. The lab work—you spend a lot of time getting set up and letting experiments run. If you spent a four hours on a research lab, a lot of it is down time. You just can’t afford to spend the time. When I have special problem students, I tell them that I expect four to six hours a week per hour credit, because of the kind of down time you have. It’s not as intensive as reading or as sitting at a computer. So, to take four fours, I’d expect them to spend 16-20 hours a week, and that’s just not right. So they’re just going to have to make some kinds of adjustments. But I think it will be OK, by and large, once they shake it loose. Part of the scary thing about it is the core courses are the ones that have gone to four hour courses, the major courses have not. They can be one, two, three, four, five, hours still. That has not impacted at all on upper-level courses. We have almost all four hour courses there now, other than the two hours and one hours, so I don’t know how that’s going to shake out.

AP: The thing, too, that I had a real problem with is they changed the lit courses to four
hours to three, because they changed all of the English curriculum. Instead of a three hour class where it met twice a week for an hour and half, they switched it to a four hour class where you meant four times a week for fifty minutes. By the time you get it, get started and get going, you’re done. You have something every night, although it’s a smaller assignment, it really wears you out and it feels like high school.

PVF: I hadn’t thought about that approach.

AP: After three years... it was just like high school again.

PVF: Would a bio 100 class feel like that to you, when we met three hours a week and had a two hour lab on one of the other days?

AP: The bio 100 kind of felt like high school regardless. I took all 100 sciences for my requirements. One I took at a community college for the summer, I took a physics class. But due to the nature of the science classes I had in high school, I had very good science classes in high school, so it repeated a lot. And just the nature of most of the students in there made it feel like high school, because they were all freshman coming from high school.

PVF: That’s a problem that they have because bio 100 is meant to serve that group of very bright students who just are not inclined to science. So, if you dumb it down, it becomes a high school course, which everyone’s already had. So you have to fit somewhere between something more than high school and something that the gung ho science majors would like to do.

AP: There’s such a broad range in the class where some people or were struggling and not trying and getting C’s and D’s, and others were very bored with it all.
PVF: It's a tough course to teach.

AP: I actually ended up, my second semester freshman year, I T.A.ed a lab, because Dr. Winnet-Murray was interested in having some non-majors that had done fine in the regular course, since it wasn't a majors course, help T.A. the lab to see how that worked. I don't know what they did after that. She seemed happy with it, but I don't know if they ever tried that again.

PVF: One of my T.A.'s this past semester was a non-major. She was one of the best T.A's I ever had.

AP: It was fun. It was hard when we did experiments that she didn't do the semester before, but she changed them. There was another T.A. who was bio major, we were paired together to do the labs, so I think that combination worked well. It was different.

PVF: Why not? It's a liberal arts school.

AP: Exactly. We talked all about changes at Hope. Are there changes in Holland that you could describe? What are the big one?

PVF: Oh yes. I think the big ones are all those things that are associated with growth. When I was growing up, it was a small town, and I knew a lot of people in town. As you'd walk down 8th Street, you'd always see folks you knew, great folks. Now, I seldom see anybody I know. Accompanying that is all the growth, the problems that you have in dealing with services, the sewers, the water, garbage collection, maintaining the roads, having enough roads, housing, land use, land fill... All that stuff was simpler because of size. I think that's one of the major changes that you
see. The 1940s, when I was an elementary school kid, early on, it was World War II, and after World War II, my high school times, those were relatively innocent times. People were happy, we got out of the war, prosperity was happening, there were a lot of jobs available. It was a positive time. In a small town, Holland probably was never a really small town, that I remember it. There was a whole feel that was different. Now, with express ways, which I learned one time, I made a detour back from a meeting, went through Abilene, Kansas, to the Eisenhower Museum. Eisenhower was responsible for the interstate system, it happened during his presidency. That was the early 50s, so that made transportation much easier. It got more and more people into cars going more and more places faster and faster. A mall wouldn’t have been practical in the 40s. A mall happened, not only a mall here in Holland, but malls in Grand Rapids, which are accessible in a thirty-five, forty minute drive. I think the whole nature of doing business has changed. Where we didn’t have a super market, we had a couple of stores down on 14th Street and Van Raalte Avenue. One small, one bigger, that dealt with most of the stuff we needed. But there was a meat market down town, so you just shopped differently. Now you go to Meijer and the quality of a lot of the meat and produce is good, but you can also buy over-alls and a wrench. I think that whole outlook has changed which has changed the look of down town. The loss of some of the stores, people thought, was really bad when things like Sears and Penny’s left down town and went into the mall. But I think that, by and large, it’s a good change, as long as you remain positive about it. A number of merchants really complained about losing those places, but
you go down 8th street and there are not very many empty store fronts right now.

AP: Now it's much more a specialty shopping or widow shopping... It's a different kind of shopping.

PVF: There are half a dozen galleries downtown. There were none in 1950. In 1950, there was probably Sears and Penney's and Montgomery Wards and maybe a Gambel's store downtown.

AP: That's just a change that's occurred in every moderate size town in America. We used to have our Penney's and everything downtown, and they're all at the malls. That's just what happened.

PVF: That's what happened, and either you can die or change your lifestyle. Fortunately, Holland has changed its lifestyle and downtown's pretty vigorous. We'd go down there and look for a parking place, sometimes you just can't find one. There are a number of restaurants downtown now which are pretty active. The specialty stores are there which weren't there. There are more offices than there used to be, and more people living downtown. It's become sort of a yuppie thing to do, to live downtown. Those are some prime locations. That whole feel of 8th Street has changed. I think it hasn't changed in a different way. West of River Avenue on 8th Street is not successful. There's no business that has done well down there. East of College Avenue is not a good address. 84 East is there, Vogelzang is there, the theater is there. 9th Street and 7th Street have not been successful. There's still the small downtown mindset, even though it's changed a whole lot. River Avenue to College, and then a little bit north and south of 8th Street on River Avenue is success,
but you need to be in those blocks.

AP: It might slowly change, because everybody wants to get down there. Like the Good Earth is on 7th, and all the coffee houses, like Socrates is on 9th, they’re kind of on the fringe, which attracts the college students.

PVF: And they put all the parking for 8th Street on 9th and 7th, and if it’s going to expand, that’s going to have to change. My contention for the new Area Center is they still have the wrong space for it. I think it ought to be in the block between College and Columbia and 7th and 8th. It’s a largely empty block, and it’s really downtown. If Parking’s to the north, the other side of 7th Street... Make that place really down town, rather than two or three blocks away. North of 6th Street, it’s not really downtown. It’s closer, but if you park in the middle and walk to a restaurant, then walk to that, you still have a pretty good hike. So I think that 8th Street area has changed a lot and not changed. There are a few businesses that are still there, at least in name, from when I was growing up. Some of the neat places, like Fabiano’s, used to be near Friss’s on 8th Street. That was a candy store and a soda shop. We used to hang out there. It was a neat place. Model Drug Store had a soda fountain area with some booths, and those were neat places to be. Those are all gone. I think also there’s an attitude change in that, when we were growing up, there was more of a kids will be kids attitude. Adults would forgive kids for doing some kinds of things that, I think, doing the same thing now, would get you into trouble. There’s less tolerance of teenagers and the kinds of things that teenagers do. That’s not necessarily good. I think another change that has happened in Holland is the population mix. Down on
our block, one of the early families in town was the Enis Gonzales family, and they lived a few doors down from us. Enis, Jr. was a good friend of mine, and I notice that family’s not listed, and a couple of the other early families are not in the exhibit in the museum right now, as early families. This was pre-high school time. So there were always Hispanic people around. There were a lot of migrant workers in the summertime, as there still are. But a lot of people settled out after World War II. The influx of Asians, that’s made for a good mix. When I was growing up, if you wanted to go to a restaurant, there weren’t very many. Russ’ was one of the places, although, as it were, the east town Russ’ was there when we were high school students, it was a drive in at that point. But there wasn’t much to do. Now you can go to one of several Mexican restaurants, or Vietemese or Chinese. You can even buy sushi in town now, so that’s all good. When we bought a house when our kids were growing up, we picked an area near Washington School, which had a high proportion of Hispanic students, so our kids would see non-anglos and be with non-anglos everyday. It was good for them.

AP: Have there been any drawbacks to the growth, or does Holland has some problems that need to be addressed.

PVF: Yes. I’ve been a school board member for a long time. One of my contentions is that once you get a high school above around 600 students, you start losing individuality. Six or 700 students, the students all know each other, the teachers all know the kids, and it’s tougher to get away with stuff. It’s easier to be a good student or a good citizen in a small group. When you get up to be 1,500 students,
you can hide yourself. I think that’s the same thing with any city that grows. The negative individuals are one in 5,000 and you have 5,000 people, there’s one out there. If you have 10,000 people, there are two out there. If you have 30,000 people, those half dozen will find each other. So, I think with growth you bring standard diversity. When Holland was small, there were some real strange characters around. But if you’re one of a kind, you are still an individual and identifiable, and you can’t hide in a group like you can when you get bigger. Schools do that same thing. One of the good things, I think, about Holland, is the nine elementary schools. It’s expensive to maintain all those buildings, it’s expensive to have all those administrators, but all those schools are smaller.

AP: I went to a really large high school, which I enjoyed, but I went to a very small grade school all through eighth grade, and I think the balance of that was good. Some of my friends talk about junior high, which is not a thing we did, and it really surprises me because it was just like high school, and I can’t imagine doing that in sixth and seventh grade, switching teachers every hour and switching classes. Where as I did have this really large high school class, there was this mix, I think they complimented each other, but to go through that all the way through would be really hard.

PVF: Through sixth grade, we were in self-contained rooms. In seventh and eight, we had four teachers, so the kids rotated through that. Then at the high school, we rotated every hour. But the high school was smallish, and everybody knew everybody, and that was the thing. So I think that Holland has every same problem that every city has that comes with size.
AP: Rarely do we have the vision to foresee what the growth will do.

PVF: You always deal with problems, and that's after the fact, as you said. So there are those kinds of things. On the other hand, your large high school or a large town offers more diversity and more different kinds of stores and more different kinds of courses you can take in school. Those kinds of things are not available. You just can't make them available in a small place. I think what you need to do is have this tension all the time of growing. My father and I used to have recreational arguments, and we would argue one way, and the next night, we might switch sides, we just enjoyed arguing. One of the things that he always maintained, and we never switched sides on that argument, was he wanted Holland to stay small. I said, either you grow or you die. I think that's the case. You can't stay the same, the world moves too fast for you to stay the same. If you don't grow you die. Holland has grown and is a prime place. It's a nice area, it's very prosperous. The present problem is there are too many jobs and too few people.

AP: The one thing I remember that I learned in biology was population growth, that you can't overshoot it. It has to level off, because if you overshoot, then it will dramatically drop. We did something with yeast, I think.

PVF: That's right. You can have crashes. That's why I say you always need this tension. You need this good tension of growing at a proper rate, under some control, with a plan. That's awfully tough to do.

AP: There is a finite point to which Holland can grow to and still maintain itself.

PVF: Yes. I was recently standing in line at the license bureau before they opened. I
found that if you stand there a half hour before they open, during the day your wait can be an hour or two or longer. Behind me was a local builder, so he and I were chatting. He said there are about two hundred building lots left in Holland city, and he said we built at a rate of about forty to fifty a year, which means that in four or five years, there will be not one single lot available to build on in Holland city.

Growth, then, has to be outside of Holland, or growth happens... (tape ends) We saw that in our neighborhood on 11th street, and all over, that in a stable neighborhood, stable because people don’t move, which means they bought it, they raised their kids, the kids are gone, and now mom and dad are there, they’ve been there for twenty years without any kids, and then they move. The house is taken over by a young family with kids. So, there can be instantaneous population increases with rolling over those houses. That can happen. But Holland city has a finite growth ability.

AP: A lot have people mentioned about the changes in Holland, the housing situation. There’s not enough housing and not enough affordable housing.

PVF: This is part of the planning, I think. You can’t have booming employment with a lot of minimum wage or low wage jobs, and expect those people to live some place else. Holland has got to recognize that there must be housing for those people who are on minimum or low wage job.

AP: I think a lot of people have moved out of the core city that grew up there, and now they’ve moved out to a nice sub-division, and they complain about the quality of the houses there, which they’ve kind of abandoned. The things nobody realizes is those
houses or 20, 30, 40 years older than the new ones they just built, and they’re beautiful. They’re old houses and they need a lot more care. They neglect them and now a lot of them are rented out, and nobody’s taking responsibility in taking care of them.

PVF: We unfortunately have some slum lords here in Holland who don’t maintain the places that they rent, and if they were regularly inspected, would not meet code. It cycles, I think. When we were looking for a house, we had a house that was functionally a two bedroom house. The third bedroom we had converted a TV room, playroom. We had two kids, so they had to share a bedroom. The younger got so rambunctious that the older one said, I’m taking over your office, which was a converted coal bin, down stairs. So we moved all of his stuff, and he had his own room down stairs. We said, we’ve got to get a bigger house. We were looking and it was a time when three bedroom ranches on the north side were extremely popular, so a lot of the big houses in the middle of the city were available, cheap. So we bought a big house 11th just west of Maple. A gorgeous house which was functionally a six bedroom house. The kids had the third floor, which was really great for them. There was an area we called the faculty ghetto in there with these big old houses on 11th, 12th, 13th Street that had been the people that lived there wanted to go the new three bedroom ranches elsewhere, so they abandoned these big old houses, which the faculty, on those salaries, could afford. There were probably 20 faculty living in that area. Then the house got too big for two of us, so we’re out here now.
AP: The college has bought up a lot of those houses, too.

PVF: Yes, and our house, we had four of us in there. Then the kids were gone, so the two of us were there for a while, it was a big house. David James from English bought it. They're in there now with four kids. So, from two people it went from six people to living in this house. The house's size is not a problem. Populations bounce. People move in... While we were living there, it became an historic district. Instead of being inexpensive, it got to be expensive to live in that core area of 11th, 12th, 13th Street.

AP: You mentioned you had been involved with the school board. Could you talk a bit about that and what that involved?

PVF: I was on the Holland school board from 1980-88 and then again for a year in '92. 80-88 was a time which we called the golden years because the schools expanded a lot. The growth began at that point. We got our bond issues passes. Don Ihrman, who was superintendent then when we were going for a bond issue, he said they never really worked very hard on the first one because nobody voted yes the first time, and we ran it the second time... I said, "Why are we doing this? Let's work on it, let's pass this thing the first time." Why spend that energy planning to lose? So we put more effort into it and we passed that issue the first time. He said in the 18 years he was the superintendent, that's the first time it's passed with the first time. But he allowed us how they never worked hard on the first one. People were becoming more pro-schools at that time. It was then that we put together and got passed the $35 million issue which built West Middle, added to the high school, and
added to the elementary schools. There was a lot of construction at that time, a lot of growth. The schools went from smallish to bigger at that time, so a lot with that growth in size come all of the problems that happen with growth, and all the benefits that happen with growth. The increased diversity, but the side issues, we really don’t have any major gang problem. But some of the student violence that has become more common happens there. Kids fight, there are more kids to irritate each other. More kids fight. My wife was a public school employee for twenty years or so, and schools have changed a lot. At that time, a lot of federal mandates came through, state mandates. We needed to deal with students whose primary language is not English. There was a time we had 18 different languages or dialects spoken by the kids in Holland schools. Which is great because you have lots of new opportunities, but the diversity or increase in size causes problem. There was a lot of special ed interest at that time. Special ed programs grew, and then mainstreaming started to happen. I think a lot of good things happened for kids during that time, and they continue to happen. I’ve been on the Ottawa Area Intermediate School Board, which is a county wide, Ottawa County plus Hamilton and Saugatuck in Allegan County, and we deal with the Careerline Tech Center and center programs for special ed and a variety of programs like that. We have a more global view of things. I know when I was on Holland Board and that ISD Board for a while, we would have gatherings and talk about what we were doing. When I talked about having four languages each for years in high school here in Holland, people from other schools would almost start drooling, because to have that much language, some of the other schools just didn’t
have it. We’ve had a broad program and better arts opportunities, through the gift of
the Herrick people for that art building on campus. By and large the Holland system
is a really good system. I say that not because of bias, but I am in part, in looking at
what happens in the county in the ISD, when you look at the results, there are a lot of
kids that score high in all the kinds of tests that you give them. There are more merit
scholars and semi-finalists from Holland than other places. Part of it’s the size, but
there are some other big schools. The Holland theater group wins state routinely
now. Quiz bowl opportunities are there. Our older kid went to Washington for a
couple of days and spent time in offices in the Senate. Project Close-up. There are
orchestra opportunities. There’s a whole lot of kind of opportunities. There’s A.P.
in a variety of courses. It’s a really good school. It’s problems are its size. Now I
am really biased. From a school board members point of view, the negotiations got
to be confrontational, which doesn’t help kids. I think with Proposal A, now there’s
less money available, but that is sorting out a little bit. But it’s a good system, and
it’s a good facility. Good teachers. There are good opportunities. I think Holland
Christian students score better in SAT’s and ACT’s. They’re a slightly different
population then Holland High does. But otherwise, Holland High ranks really high in
all of the areas. We’ve got a good school system. That has been good from way
back until now. I was a student at Holland Christian. I played on the golf team. I
remember a time when we used to schedule our own matches, and we played a
variety of schools. One year we decided to schedule Holland High, so we arranged
that, and the school officials decided we weren’t going to do that. There were
feelings between the schools. Even though they’re both really good schools, there were feelings between the school, at that point. Now, competition is routine. The schools get along much better than they used when I was a high school student. I think that’s a better community feeling than there used to be.

AP: I still run into some people that have definite opinions about which one their kids are going to. I don’t know what the difference is, basically. I guess I don’t know enough about it. I guess you’ve got to have a rival high school.

PVF: Yeah. Then West Ottawa arose out of a real, real problem. Have people talked about that? Holland City had a school that was essentially full. As people in the West Ottawa area began to build and more and more people came there, we didn’t have the space, and there was a discussion about annexation. The superintendent at that time got really hard-nosed about it and said, if you’re going to come here, you also have to annex to the city of Holland. People who were out there were there, in part, because taxes were lower. Holland stopped accepting students when they were full. Those kids would get on a bus on the north side and drive through town and go to Saugatuck High School.

AP: Even today, some of the boundaries as to who goes to what school are weird. Kids live next to a school they don’t go to.

PVF: Right. So, those districts are strange.

AP: Has there been any initiative to try and change that?

PVF: No, there really hasn’t. In part because the way schools used to be financed on local taxes. The more area you had, the more people you had paying taxes, the more
money you had. Now, with Proposal A, funding comes from the state on a per student basis. There's also the open enrollment, you can enroll at a different district if they'll accept you and yours will release you. So there's less problem with where you go to school because where you go to school, you're going to get your taxes, and it's not going to be a problem of paying taxes to one place and wanting to go to a different place. I think the boundaries are going to get blurred. It will mean less to be in Holland versus Hamilton School District, because there are kids who live in sight of Lake View School, but they're in the Hamilton district and they're eight or nine miles away from the high school and they're five or six miles away from Blue Star, which is the closest elementary school, when they can see the school in the other district. So that area south there has just not developed. It's condos now, people with no kids, because of the school situation. But those things are changing. I think we're going to see those people who are... It makes no sense, as we were talking earlier, as cities grow, to have such a tight boundary around Holland and Zeeland, when they're going to merge and we ought to be thinking regionally rather than be thinking Holland/Zeeland/West Ottawa/Saugatuck. In the old days, we used to talk about Boswash, which was Boston to Washington D.C., as an area. I haven't heard Boswash in a long time, maybe because they stopped thinking individually and are thinking more regionally. We've got to get regional thinking going here.

AP: I come from Bay City, and people ask how large it is compared to Holland. Well, I really can't compare because Bay City/Saginaw/Midland run in to each other, the tricity area. You go to the mall or restaurants in any of those places. My sister works
in Midland, my dad works in Saginaw, my mom works in Bay City. It's just one big area, that's just the way we think of it. The schools are separate, but other than that...

PVF: You have to get real chauvinistic about schools. Maybe because of those rivalries, maybe because a lot of people are high school graduates and big things happen to them at football games and basketball games.

AP: We had three high schools and we had to close one down when I was in high school and that was just a big problem. People that had graduated from the high school were really upset, and that was our cross-town rival...

PVF: I remember Arthur Hill was one of the schools that was a tough basketball school when I was growing up.

AP: Yeah, we've never had good luck with them.

PVF: Is Arthur Hill still in existence?

AP: Yes. Have there been any controversies in Holland or Hope?

PVF: Oh, there always are. I think some of the big Holland controversies involved the mall. Originally the mall was supposed to be built behind us here. We weren't here at that point. We wouldn't be here if the mall was there, probably. But the council made enough problems that they decided they weren't going to build here and they were going to move out of town. So that was a big stinky thing for a while, the location of the mall. But it was at a time when property taxes were coming into the city, and Holland lost a whole lot of dollars because of the loss of the mall and the tax dollars. It wouldn't make that much difference anymore. The problem with the
teenagers that comes along with growth, and how big a problem are you going to make it. I'm not sure how big the problem really is. Being a member for at least twenty years of the coalition to band handguns, I'm anti-violence, I may even be a pacifist. So, I don't like to see those kinds of activities, but it's really easy to become afraid and blow it out of proportion. I'm not exactly sure what the proportion is. I think one of the things we talked about earlier was housing. There are some folks in Holland who want Holland to be an exclusive community, but who want to hire cheap help. You can't have it both ways. Controversies on campus, of course. One of the ongoing discussions for many, many years was that core curriculum. That generated a lot of heat. It's at least the dust has settled now, I don't know if the implementation will cause problems or not. Then there are little individual problems like, how hard are you going to press the religious dimension in hiring faculty. There are some people who've got very emotionally involved in some of those issues. When you have a free thinking faculty and a more conservative board, you're bound to clash.

AP: How would you compare the openness of the student body to the faculty?

PVF: I think the student body has become more conservative.

AP: Does that cycle? Have you seen that?

PVF: I think it's gotten more and more conservative over the years. When we were students, I think that the student body was more diverse, geographically, politically, and theologically. I think there's been some effort, maybe, or maybe just more successful recruiting in getting a more conservative, less open minded student body.
AP: When I was recruited it wasn’t an aspect at all, four years ago. But just three, two years ago, it really has been. The attention paid to the Christian aspect of the school in the past three years, really become fore-fronted.

PVF: I as a biologist appreciate diversity. The diversity is really important. One of the things I’d like to see happen more here, as I, starting at Lake Forest College, sitting at my desk one day, and this guy stood in the doorway and said, "Hi, I’m Bill Orzen. I transferred here from Brooklyn College because Brooklyn College got to be too big. I’m in your class, I’ll see you." Bill Orzen was a Jewish guy from New York City. He was a really cool guy. The diversity there was good. I had another student, not Bill, who during lab said, we’re doing this dissection of the fetal pig; I’m Jewish. I said, "Well, let’s see what we can do." I talked to the chairperson and she called the local rabbi, and the rabbi said, as long as he doesn’t bite it, it’s OK. So we went back to this. It was largely because he was taking this because it was a required course. He came to class with his latex gloves and his Glade air freshener. A preserved pig smells. He got through the course alright. That kind of diversity is good. Passover, we did things differently than we did other days because there were a bunch of students who would be gone. We can get away with closing down on Good Friday afternoon. It’s really weird because it’s not a holiday, but there are not classes. So, I don’t think we’re diverse enough. We’re not diverse enough in politics...

AP: I’m sad to say, I think a lot of students wouldn’t understand the story you just told about the pig.
PVF: Yeah. So we’re not diverse enough in ethnicity. We’re not diverse enough in politics. We’re not diverse enough in theology. You can be all of those in a denominational school. I think as soon as we try to get too much of a mind, we’ll have major problems in holding good faculty and doing good teaching. If you come with a point of view, nobody can teach you anything.

AP: I’ve always noticed the faculty seems to be the most open and diverse aspect of the campus.

PVF: Well, see, I’m pretty liberal. Jack Holmes is not very liberal. We go to the same church and often sit side by side, and Jack and I are friends. But, I can push Jack’s buttons and get him off into a really conservative Republican tirade. Which I know he’ll do, and I love Jack for it, but I don’t agree with a whole lot of what he says. Nor does he agree with what I think. So we can get together and argue. That’s great. One of the things I miss, I haven’t gotten enough of it in last couple of years, is I used to go to the Klett for lunch, and often Jack would be there and Earl Curry and I and a few others at a table. Depending on the day, you could have a really great argument.

AP: Do you think the student body censors itself? I don’t know how much cause for discussion you have during your classes.

PVF: We don’t have much opportunity. The intro courses there, they get to be 75 students big and you can’t have discussions in that. Although we have found a way to have discussions by breaking into groups of four or five, but you can’t have, then, a whole class discussion. But we talk in labs a lot, but it’s not discussions, it’s just talking
and chatting. I had people last semester from extremely politically and theologically conservative folks to very liberal people, which made for some interesting discussions during lab time. But I think that one of the things you ought to do in college is be open minded and especially talk about other points of view. Being a biased liberal, I see conservatives being unwilling to do that.

AP: There’s a very liberal tendency to be more open just to differences in opinions. Where as, somebody coming from a conservative slant won’t even accept the difference.

PVF: That’s why Jack and I get along. I’m willing to push his buttons and argue with him.

AP: Which might be, too, being young, you don’t get it that somebody can and will have a different opinion. It’s hard to see how they can, because you obviously think you’re right and it’s hard to see how they could keep that opinion after you explained that to them.

PVF: One of the problems is being indoctrinated theologically. If you’re indoctrinated, you have boundaries which are pretty well prescribed. Anybody on the other side of the boundary is wrong.

AP: Have you ever had any issues with Creationism versus Evolution in teaching?

PVF: Yes and no. One of the things I have often done on my first day of class is say that we’re doing biology. One of the important tenents of biology is evolution. So, we’re going to talk about evolution. I don’t intend to change anybody’s theology, so if we want to talk about that outside of class, OK, but discussion of Creationism doesn’t have a place in a biology class. There are people, when we get to those areas, I can
see, turn me off. They’re there just because the stuff I’m talking about will be on the exam, but they’re not buying a piece of it. They aren’t willing to consider talking about it. I think that’s unfortunate.

AP: How do you combine science and theology in your life?

PVF: It’s not a problem because the science doesn’t dictate my theology, nor does my theology say that I have to have particular views about other areas of the world. I consider myself a Christian, but I’m convinced that evolution happens. There’s just too much evidence in the world to say that it doesn’t happen.

AP: Could you say that there are two different spheres, so that putting them on a continuum is inappropriate?

PVF: Yes. The Bible is a lot of allegory, and to believe allegory, to take it literally, you just get yourself into a horrible sticky morass. There are preachers, those evangelists I see every once in a while when I’m surfing late at night on TV, who are really perverse. They really are perverse. They talk about either you believe in God or evolution and that’s not an option. When they get you all het up and tell you that, then you buy into that and then you have some problems dealing with other aspects of your life, especially science. In one place the Bible says that the earth was created in six days, and another place says a day is as a thousand years, do you read both of those parts literally, or is there a part that you don’t take literally. When you look at the first creation story in Genesis, there was light before there was sun. The earth was without form, but with water. I can’t read it literally.

AP: Despite the number of conservative students coming here, I have talked to people who
have come from very conservative backgrounds, and for them, coming to college was the mind expanding experience for them, even though somebody coming from a very liberal background would say, you’ve got to be kidding? This was diverse to you?

PVF: I tell my intro students in that first lecture, also, you always challenge the dogma. The strength of science is in challenging the dogma. You say, prove it to me. You’ve got to write up an experiment and write your procedures so somebody else can do it and say, yeah, you were right. You need to put that into your theology, also, and not be thought panicked. Somewhere along the line, someone has to say, there was a time, if you want to go really literal, there was an old testament time before Jesus. Are those people saved the same way as people afterwards? They were all Jews. So with that, I just tell students, and I think for me, also, is that the origin gets you into discussions that are not productive. Was there a Big Bang?

Somewhere, material had to originate. How ever it originated is not a point of discussion for me, because there isn’t any good evidence of where that matter came from in the first place. It’s not productive discussion. But it is productive to talk about what’s happened to life on earth over the last 4 billion years. Bishop Usher’s chronology incorporated a number of popular views at the time. There were Muslim calendars that were similar and there’s some magic number. 6,000 is a kind of magic number. I don’t want to say magic. It was a sort of spiritual number, so that a creation at 4,000 with another 2,000 after the time of Christ, is a good number in a number of theologies, Christian and non-Christian. He had incorporated a bunch of stuff, and then decided that it was on October 15, at noon, 4004 B.C. that the world
was created. He describes why he chose noon and stuff like that. It's a totally man
made creation and it's been glommed onto and held tenaciously by literal readers.
This outside thing has been imposed on that. It doesn't fit, it doesn't work. I think
it's important to not confuse theology and science. Too many people confuse them,
it's hard to sort them out.

AP: How do you see the role of the church in Holland?

PVF: Pervasive. Again, when I surf, these people are always wanting money. What they
do with their money is have bigger and fancier and better TV productions. Or they'll
build there theme park. The money isn't going to help anyone. I see that as a
difficulty in Holland. We go to the Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterians are
liberal. It's been harder for me to be a Presbyterian than in the conservative church I
was brought up in, because the Presbyterians expect me to live that stuff everyday. It
was more, go to church on Sunday, Catechism on Wednesday, and then don't do a lot
of stuff, when I was growing up. That was fairly easy to do. There was much less
influence on living it every day.

AP: When you say living it every day, are you talking about...

PVF: Not evangelical, but being a Christian and treating other people appropriately. So I
think that the Presbyterians are not evangelical, but what they do is get involved
heavily in social issues. That's the living it kind of thing, being involved in that. So
I think the more conservative churches need to be more involved in social issues. We
have a lot of homeless people. Again, several years ago, there were 27 kids in the
Holland public Schools who were homeless. They weren't on the street, they lived in
city mission and they lived with their relatives and things like that. I think you need to deal with those kinds of things. You need to get outside of your congregation into the community. As the community grows, there are more and more those kids of social problems that need to be dealt with. A church like Maple Avenue Church, which is the one I grew up in, now has a fence around their parking lot with a basketball court so balls don’t go out in to the street, and they have an inner-city program run there for all kinds of kids. Some of the neighbors complain because kids are there late in the evening playing basketball and doing stuff, but I think that church really has good outreach. I think that’s a thing that has to happen. If you’re going to be into yourself and build bigger things and be only evangelical, you’re missing the part where you’re supposed to love the others as yourself.

AP: What kind of size is your church?

PVF: 600 members, I think.

AP: Do you have any thoughts on the trend here that a lot of churches are consolidating, closing down, and churches are getting a lot larger?

PVF: No, in fact, when I was on the session, we had discussion and I was one of the leaders of the movement to go to two services rather than build a big church that would accommodate everybody. You lose something, because I go to first service, and Jan sings in choir, which sings in second service, so there are two different populations. Other folks, I don’t know because they go to second service, they don’t know me because I go to first service. But I think that has been appropriate because we have been able to add some rooms and things, and keep our sanctuary the same.
size, and spend that money for more appropriate things: our mission budget is about 20% of our total budget, plus all the little things that go on the side. I think of the total dollars that our congregation raises outside the building fund, twenty-five to thirty percent are in mission, which is defined as local, national, and international. So I think that's an appropriate use of your money rather than building a big church.

AP: Have there been any significant people in your life in Holland that have made significant changes?

PVF: I had a high school chemistry, physics teacher who was important to me and, I think, had a big influence. I don't think he had a masters degree, he was just a college graduate. But he was a good teacher and he got us to do science. He may be one of those who influenced me to go that way. Other folks, of course my parents are important. They encouraged me to do what I wanted to do. My father owned a business, and he would really have liked for me to go into business with him, but I knew I couldn't get along with him in business day to day. It was good for me to go to science, where I liked to be. A variety of individuals. I don't think there have been any major impact... The botany prof, when I was a student, he and I got along very well and we chatted a lot. But it wasn't a turn the corner kind of experience. I've been a science geek since I was a little kid.

AP: Did you have a chemistry set?

PVF: Oh, of course. Had a chemistry set. I collected all kinds of animals. I had a snake collections.

AP: Did you put bugs in the jar with the wholes punched in the lid?