

7-8-2002

Wierenga, Ollie Oral History Interview: History of Law Enforcement in Holland

Matthew Nickel

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_law



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Nickel, Matthew, "Wierenga, Ollie Oral History Interview: History of Law Enforcement in Holland" (2002). *History of Law Enforcement in Holland*. Paper 11.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_law/11

Published in: 2002 - *History of Law Enforcement in Holland (H88-0234)* - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, July 8, 2002. Copyright © 2002 Hope College, Holland, MI.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of Law Enforcement in Holland by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.

Oral History Project 2002
Joint Archives of Holland
Holland Police

Interviewee:
Ollie Wierenga
(Edited)

Conducted by:
Matthew Nickel
8 July 2002

ABSTRACT: (Topics Appear in similar order of Transcript)

Police Station during childhood, Skinny VanRy, Small Force, Domestic Incident, Weekend Time, Mexican Jailed, Dog Catcher, Phil Brooks and 7UP, Padnos, Dredging the Channel, Chief VanHoff's Policing Style, Pedestrian accident, Pete Bontekoe, 1932 Bank Robbery, Gillette Brother's Robbery, Diekema, Officer duties, Clocking the Train speed, Communication, Hobos, Lamour and O'Brien in Holland, Lincoln School kids guarded from train tracks, Local courtesies for officers, Ice boats, Polycythemia, Onslow County Sheriff Posse, Family, How Ollie became an officer, Donnelly, VanHoff's Police and his nickname "Fleetfoot", Summer roller-skating, Community support, Traffic, Strict community, Rules, How crime has changed, Intuition, Training and learning, Rewards, Guidelines of Police

Oral History Interview
Holland Police
Interviewee: Ollie Wierenga
Interviewer: Matthew Nickel
8 July 2002

[We began the interview looking through photos and clippings off tape]

OW: When I was about 10 or 11 years old the police station was in the city hall and it was on the south side of the first floor and there were steps that ran up there and if you went to the right there was a little window and you could look in that window and that was a cell block, one cell. That was all Holland had in 1931 for the police and then they had the office spaces on the side which very small. That is where it started, and you could look through that window if somebody was in the cell and when we kids went downtown we would always look in there to see if there was somebody there. I remember VanRy was a chief. And he had a brother who was "Skinny" VanRy, they called him Skinny. He had a farm out there that Butch Tanis built by Gibson, in that area. When I was, well, after I got off, it must have been about 1947 or 48, I went there with two other fellas. I never was there before. When we rode by it there was a touring car sitting in the yard, so we kept on going. The fella who was driving our car, he said "oh no." So we waited about a half-hour and then the car was gone and we went in and talked to Skinny. The car was evidently gangsters from the mid-west. There were two guys standing bodyguard outside the car while the other people were in the building. Skinny was the kind of a guy to go in there and say, "I would like to have a three carrot diamond ring with white gold." He would say, "okay." He would leave you in the room and he would disappear for five minutes. He would go upstairs or

to the basement or wherever and he would come back with not one ring, but a tray full of diamond rings, and you picked out whatever you wanted. Anyway, when we went into the house there, the one who was driving the car knew Skinny. He had a slot machine on the floor there, a penny slot machine, with cherries and bells and like that. It had a double jackpot. I was kind of interested in it, and Skinny says "you like that?" I says, "Boy, that's an antique." He says, "Give me fifteen dollars and you can have it." I bought a slot machine; if I had it today, Lord only knows what it would be worth. It even had money in the jackpot and money in the back. When we moved to California I didn't want to put it in the car and go. Now that was Skinny VanRy. That same property today belongs, or did belong, to Butch Tanis; and he made a game reserve out of it for deer, ducks, everything. It is beautiful now that same property.

I showed you that picture about how shorthanded we were. When you went on the police department you would start off as the alley beat and your next advancement would be the downtown beat and then of course riding in the cruisers. They called them cruisers, now they call them squad cars. But on the, one of the first nights I was on, shortly after I got on, I caught somebody who broke into the poolroom on East 8th street. That used to be Cunningham Pool Room. The door was unlocked, was open, and I walked in and I caught him. There was only one squad car patrolling the whole city of Holland so I couldn't contact him. I had to hold onto this guy and so I couldn't even use the phone. I got him over there and it was just a short time later that I had a domestic call; that was when I was on the downtown beat. We went into his house (he had an

argument with his wife). Just to tell you how things work out. He must have thrown the ketchup bottle; I remember ketchup being on the walls. We got him cooled off. We told him either he is cooling down with the family or we are going to take him in and lock him up. He finally admitted that he would behave himself, saying he would go for a walk. So when I was on the downtown beat, there he was in front of the Kreske store. He was drunk and I told him I would get a cab and run him home or else I'll take him in. He says, "You ain't big enough." Well, that was a challenge. So I grabbed him by the seat of the pants and the back of the neck and marched him right down 8th street from the middle of Central to College down to where the police station was by the fire barn. I got alongside of River Avenue, by Peck's Drug Store, and he had been struggling all the time trying to swing his hands to hit me. I got there and he took another swing, but I couldn't hold him any more. I slammed him down and his head hit, (at that time it was not blacktop), the big paving bricks. One of them hit him on the head here [Motions to the right side of the forehead] and he got a big knot and was knocked out. Well, there were two boys who were watching from across the street. One was Chet Cramer's brother Herald, and another one; they knew me. They ran across when the guy was lying there, "can we help you Mr. Wierenga?" I says, "Yup." I says, "Pick him up and carry him for me." So one grabbed his arms and the other grabbed his feet and they took him over to the station. Well the next morning I got a phone call about, from Judge VanderMuellen. He was a very very dedicated judge, very concerned about people and things. He says "What are we going to do with this?" (I won't mention his name,) "If we give him

jail time his family will suffer and he will probably lose his job.” And he says “Have you any ideas?” I says “Yes, why don’t you just, (as I remember incidents in the book) give him weekend time.” He said “that is a wonderful idea.” So the guy got done with work Friday afternoon and he had to be by the police station at six o’clock and he stayed there from six o’clock Friday night to five o’clock Sunday. Then he was released. I think he had four weekends like that and that was his punishment. We never had any trouble with the man again and his family united real well. But our incidents were so different than they are today. Today, from what I understand, read them their rights and you don’t touch them at all or things like that. In my era, you handled it the best way you saw fit. That is the way it was done then. If it took a struggle, it was a struggle. If you needed to be a diplomat, you were that way. Now, I know some of the differences because my grandson is a deputy sheriff. He is six foot five or six, and the sheriff of Ottawa County asked that he would come on the department. He was going to college. He is still going to get his college degree. He is going to work nights and get that. He is with the Ottawa County Sheriff Department in the Prison Unit. That complex over there, I don’t know if you have ever seen it.

MN: No.

OW: Oh go down there and see it. They have, I think, room for three hundred prisoners. Next year they are going to build room for one hundred and seventy. That is how bad it is. When we were in our era, (my era), you’d have to take them to Grand Haven, to the county jail there. Well, Gerry VanderBeek, my sergeant was the sergeant of the police station, but he became sheriff of Ottawa

County. That was funny because when he said it, he went on to say he was going to be a Republican. I said, "Gerry, how come? What happened?" He said, "Well, if I want to be Sheriff of Ottawa County, I have got to be Republican, because they never had a Democratic one." Anyway, that's what he did. He became sheriff of Ottawa County that way, by being a Republican. But that was then, now of course it is still Republican with that sheriff business. That fellow that I caught in the pool room that I told you about, he was Mexican. We searched him and everything was fine. You know I couldn't find anything. He said he couldn't speak English so when we got to the station I said, "well, let's lock him up and then we will get an interpreter." So I took him in the back room and put him in a cellblock and locked the door. When I did he looked around all four walls, and seeing he was in a cell, and he jumped on the bunk and out of his watch pocket he comes up with a switchblade. And you noticed we never searched him there. He had a switchblade in there. He flipped the button, stood on the bunk, and had his hand back like he was going to throw it. I pulled a revolver out and pointed it at him. I said, "If you don't drop it, I will kill you." He dropped that knife, and Nickels, he talked the best English you ever heard in your life. And later he said that he never realized that the end of a gun was that big. He said it looked like a canon looking at me, but he could talk the best English you wanted to hear. Oh what else?

Holland Police Department had a, was in charge of the dog catcher. His name was Tony Byer. He called himself an "auto top doctor" because in that era they didn't have a metal roof on the car, it was cloth-like. He would paint it with

tar and stuff like that. He called himself the "auto top doctor" but he was also deputy sheriff. He would be down to the station to see what was going on all the time, but was not in charge of it. Nick Kammeraad was a mayor of Holland years and years ago. He didn't have a diplomatic job of any type. He repaired shoes. He was mayor of Holland, 16th and River. Phil Brooks, that was probably 1937 or '38, had a 1929 Buick and he painted it lime green and he put on the side "7UP". That was the beginning of the 7UP in Western Michigan.

MN: Oh really.

OW: Everybody said he would go bankrupt, but it was Phil Brooks who later on laughed at everybody else. I happened to be over there at Busscher Vault Co. in Holland after Phil had died. They made cement vaults for the caskets. Phil Brooks had one, but it is all copper lined. Copper lined. But Phil Brooks was an oddity that only the firemen and policemen knew. In that era, if the fire whistle blew, (they would do it at the station see), it was all volunteers except the drivers. So if they drove "whoop" five times and then stopped and then it would blow two, "whoop whoop." That would mean 52 and the firemen would have knowledge of where 52 was. That would be like 18th and River and they would all go to that area. The policemen would go too. They would close off the block so that other cars would not go in there, just the volunteer fireman ,so they left room, except for one car, and that would be the green 7UP car. Phil Brooks was an ardent fan of the fire department just like Louis Padnos was. Phil Brooks would bring that car in there. People could never understand if there was a fire in January and there was snow on the ground, that the firemen would go over to Phil Brooks and drink

7UP. [Laughter] Unknown to anybody else, each bottle of 7UP had one shot of whiskey in it. It was a 7 and 7 when the firemen drank it, that was a secret for a, well, I think we were the only ones who knew it. The other ardent fan of the fire department was Louis Padnos. He would go down there, oh probably three or four nights out of seven, and sit at the east 8th street fire barn and play setback with the drivers. It seemed he would always bring a lunch, cake, cookies, or donuts or stuff like that. But he was a very humble man. What a credit it is to him and his wife to bring up three boys that inherited the Padnos business and how they conducted themselves. It was not given to them, they worked for it. He was of Jewish descent. There were not many known Jewish people in Holland at that era, but he was the one in my mind that worked very hard for what he got. The boys really went after it later on as they got older.

Do you know, if you go from Holland, back to Holland by Windmill Island, you come down and end up on Pine Avenue, that used to be all marshland. All marsh, all the way to the back of Donnelly and all of that was just water and marsh. Then the Lyons Construction Company, dredged the channel, and all the way back in that era. All the dirt was pumped on there and it made that ground where Louis Padnos is now, where the power plant is, and Brewer Coal Dock (which used to be Nettering's Coal Dock). Then they put the channel in there for the big boats to get up in there, but that used to be all marshland, and that was an achievement that a lot of engineers didn't think was possible. When you look at it today, when I ride over there, I think so often about how it was all marshland and

now look at it. There is a road going through there, thousands of tons of coal and gravel and all that junk from there, that was Lyon Construction.

Chief VanHoff, who was my chief, did not like a police cruiser identity. In other words, when I was on, we had two Fords, three motorcycles, and one tri-motorcycle for parking. But the two cruisers had a siren which we called a bumblebee which is the little one, and that was placed under the hood. No red light or anything. He was definitely set on all the tickets that you could write, which was contrary to the way I was brought up. He would designate if you were in a cruiser for eight hours, he expected you to make eight tickets a day. Marinus Smeege was one of them and everyone of us revolted when he put a poster up on it. In other words if you added it up Marinus Smeege would be writing a ticket for just about everybody in Holland after a couple or three years. And if you were on a motorcycle like I was, he would expect me to do five a day. It was ridiculous. And his thought was if they don't see you, you'll be able to get them better. Not even a motorcycle had a red light on it for emergencies. In other words, he didn't protect us for what we had to do. There is more stuff I could say, but I won't say any more on that. For instance, I don't know if the little girl is living now or not. She was five years old when this happened. I got a call, it was about six o'clock in the evening and a little girl got hit by a Vogelzang truck, they had a pickup truck that delivered stuff, and the little girl ran in the street, her head went in the headlight and she laid there and I was within a block of it so I saw her and I did something that came nature I guess, I picked the little girl up and I put her in the front seat of this cruiser and went right to the hospital with her rather

than to wait for an ambulance. Now I am not knocking the ambulance, because at that time the ambulances were not like they are today. They were owned by the funeral homes. Even the corner of Holland, of Ottawa county was Gilbert Vandewater and he was undertaker for Dykstra funeral home. So I put the little girl in the front seat and took her there and I stayed with her till her mother and father came, her name was Jacobs, but because I did what I did and I knew I shouldn't have done it, I got three days on the walking beat, that was Jake's punishment for me, but I never regretted that. Now did you ever know that we had probably the only person ever kidnapped in Holland was a police officer.

MN: No way.

OW: His name was Pete Bontekoe, now I was probably between five or ten years old so that was over seventy years ago, and it happened during the night. Who did it must have got a drop on him or wrestled him, but they took him to sixteenth street. They took him and tied him around a tree and took his handcuffs and handcuffed him to the tree. And he didn't get released until around seven o'clock in the morning when some people that were going to work heard him hollering and seen him. So as far as I know, he has got to be the only person in Holland that was kidnapped and that had to be a detective from the Holland Police Department. If you want to know any of them, they were Chief VanRy, Benny Kalkman, Jim Spruit, Dave O'Connor and Pete Bontekoe they were original police officers when the police station was in the... [pause] Did you ever go by the, on eight and Central, and if you look, and did you ever go over there and look at that wall?

MN: Richard Bonge actually took me over to show me

OW: The holes?

MN: Yeah, and what he said is that was from the Bank Robbery.

OW: Bank Robbery, right. Alright, the bank is on the corner and the star theatre and that too, and then there was a narrow building and then I think it was Columbia Hat Cleaners. They would take hats and block them, men who wore hats then. Anyway, when it happened, he went down in the basement and he had a shotgun, and in order to get to the basement from the outside they had a stairway and then a door would go in there and it was cement, and he stood in there and when one of the robbers came down the alley, he shot him. And that Robber went to 7th and River and stood in the doorway of Ballmaster's Farm place and Ben Kalkman was standing behind a telephone pole and you could see the bullets in the telephone pole where the guy was shooting and a car came by and picked him up and then he went out towards Drent. That was when Chief Lievense got shot, and Kite got shot. There were two of them that got shot in that bank robbery. And across the street, on that side of the street was Ollie's Sport Shop and it happened at 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock and the business people ran in Ollie's Sport Shop, grabbed a shotgun, and shells and they were out on the street because it was, must have been firing from all different directions. The State Police had a big Lincoln Touring car and it didn't have the automatic siren, [shows motion of crank] and that is the way it was. Because I was in the seventh grad in school and I saw it go down River avenue with that siren because it made so much noise. Now, I am sure it is

still there somewhere, but when I was on the police department in 1946, in the men's room upstairs was a mirror, did you see it?

MN: I have seen pictures of it.

OW: That was up there.

MN: In the men's locker room.

OW: Yeah, and it had got splinters, from a bullet that hit it, and it splintered the glass and they made a mirror out of it. That was up there then, I imagine it still is. Then there was another bank robbery in Hudsonville. That was done by the Gillette brothers. They borrowed a car, the car was a Whippet. You never heard of that did you?

MN: No.

OW: That is the kind of car it was, a whippet, a small one. And that car belonged to Len Knoll. I was going to school with his son Eugene Knoll. He had a garage on seventeenth, do you know where Repco is?

OW: In that building. It used to be a garage, a mechanics garage. And they came in and put the money in a 50 gallon drum, trash drum, put it in the bottom and all kinds of crap on top of it and they went to work and the police come over there and they arrested them and they got the money out of the trash barrel. The Gillette brothers. And then they got Knoll as part of it because he let them use the car. That was one of the... Do you know that house, Nickels, can you picture that house on 12th street on Pine and Maple, in the middle of the block there is a big white house that sits there and it borders both 12th street and 13th, The church is

on the corner and then I think the parsonage and then I think it is the big house, to remember or can you recollect it?

MN: I am not certain.

OW: If you ever want to do something go by there and take a look at it. That house belonged to the ambassador to the Netherlands. Diekema. When we were in the third grade of school he died in the Netherlands, and in those days embalming wasn't like it is today. They took his body and embalmed it and put in the casket and they put it on a boat to bring it across here, and I was in the third grade at Tromble school, and we all had to go see that. I believe that was the first dead person I ever saw in a casket, but we all went to the Hope College chapel, that is where his body lie and stayed, but that home is still there, and that to me is one of the historic homes in Holland, Diekema, and that is the reason.

One of the first airports in Holland was over there on 16th street, just past the cemetery, that is where the airport used to be, and there was a fellow by the name of Ernie Burns who was a pilot and he worked for Holland Furnace, Ernie Burns was his name, and then on the same subject that if you go down 12th street all the way to the end, that factory there used to be Zieghigh aircraft and they made airplanes there, not too many people know that, that used to be a factory over there.

Kollen Park, when I was on the department, it all had to be out of there by twelve o'clock, Kollen Park was closed, and no bicycle riding on the sidewalks, Jake VanHoff didn't want that, you couldn't bike through Centennial Park and no tennis on Sunday, I don't care if is a public park or where, no tennis on Sunday

and that was Jake. You couldn't play ball in the city park. When I started on you got 32 dollars a week and you would work five days and your sixth day would be off. And if you responded to a fire alarm when they blow that whistle, you got two hours extra. In other words if I wanted to be off, instead of going to work at six, I could go to work at eight, I would get two hours for answering to a fire call, but they would not pay you for it. On Wednesday afternoons the stores would be closed. Merchants would all close on Wednesday afternoons and that was when we would have to clean our motorcycles with gunk. Get that oil off and stuff like that. One of the duties of the midnight to late morning would be at three o'clock, you would have to ride all the avenues and any cars that were parked you would have to ticket them because there was no parking between two and five AM. Usually at 5:30 in the morning you would go to the depot and you would sit there because Jake Boardman, he used to drive, he had a big international truck and he would haul all the mail from the post office to the depot and from the depot back to the post office and usually when there was money to be put in the banks there it would come in on the 5:30 train, and Jake would get the money and he would have to take it to the post office and we usually escorted him from the depot and that was one of the jobs then. The train speeds.

MN: The train?

OW: The train. From 22nd to 24th street, that was where you checked the train for speed.

MN: For speed?

OW: For speed. You would go along Lincoln Avenue, which was along side the railroad tracks if you look at it, and think about it, and that is where you would check the train for speed. In the springtime, Ben Alferdink was in charge of the railway express. In the spring time, there were so many hatcheries around Holland and Zeeland he would ship them all out by railways express. Sometimes he had three or four of those great big wagons that they load the express on, full of chicks and they would be put on the train. If you were on the downtown beat, as soon as traffic would let up on 8th street, you would go behind the bank and you would turn the signal lights off. They would be blinking yellow for 8th street until you got to river avenue, then it would be a flashing red, and for river it was a flashing yellow, that was just eight street.

I don't think anybody, the police station had got a, after the bank robbery they got a double barreled shotgun and they got it sawed off and I think I am the only one perhaps who used it in the line of duty. Jerry VanderBeek was at the desk and we got calls a couple of nights in a row about the starlings on Lawndale Court. All their droppings, it was terrible, terrible, they would come and they would roost there at night, and they would be chirping for the first couple of hours, so Jerry he got the phone call there, and at that time there were a lot of dignitaries from Holland Furnace and I went with Jerry and Chuck Dulyea went. And we all had, I had the double barrel sawed-off shotgun, and Jerry had his shotgun, and Dulyea had his. And we went up to it with a box of shells and I stood in from of Henry Wynbergs house, and there was maple tree and I had two shells in and I shot up in the tree, boom, boom, and then I ducked. Believe it or

not, we had almost a bushel basket full of starlings that were shot, with two shots from that shotgun. Now in them days you didn't have a radio either. So if they need a officer for a domestic or something they would have a switch in the police station and they would put that switch on and a blinker, a light would go on, on 8th street and River, Central, College and Lincoln. And then on 19th and River there was an arm hung out with a light bulb, if that light was on that meant that we had to contact the station. That was our way of communication. Could you see them working that way today?

MN: Certainly not.

OW: In the wintertime you would have all the hobos and homeless people who would all go down to the police station and they would sleep in the cell and then in the morning they would get 15 cents for breakfast. You would end up with anywhere from three to seven, eight guys who would stay overnight in the jail. Tulip Time was embarrassing when, Holland Furnace used to bring celebrates in for Tulip Time and one of the first ones they brought was Dorothy Lamour and Pat O'Brien, very notable people, and they stayed in the Warm Friend Tavern and when the parade came down there, people were booing and all hollering and all that junk and they, out of their window they were throwing confetti. The confetti was a Gidions Bible they tore it up. They were never forgiven for that either. Driver's Licenses were handed out by the police department. By Lincoln School, 11th and Lincoln there was that school, the school was here and just a little ways there were the train tracks. They had a guard there all the time during school for them children so they don't cross the railroad tracks just because of the train. All

the paving that was done in Holland on the streets. I don't think I wasn't even five years old. So that would be about 75 years ago they paved 18th street and all that blacktop, all that tar that was used, they had a big plant back over by the Holland Furnace office, on Lincoln avenue and the name of the company was KB Olson. All the men who worked for them were colored and they were from Grand Rapids. That did the actual paving. All the policemen used to get their uniforms cleaned and pressed free. Ideal Cleaners. His name was Bob Visscher who Owned it and later on became mayor, but he did that as a courtesy for all the policemen.

MN: Did a lot of businesses do those kinds of things for the police?

OW: At Christmas time. At Christmas time, different companies would send stuff over there. There was one businessman, his plans were altered by me. He met a lady, both notable people in Holland and I caught them together by the freight depot. I told them to get in the car and go home! And I didn't do anything. So both of them got in their cars and they both went down 8th street and they both run through the red light on 8th and River. The flashing light, so I stopped them in Pine avenue and 8th street and I wrote both of them up for a ticket. I didn't say a thing about what had happened, nor did I make a report. But the following Christmas it think we got a big bottle of wine from him, each one of the officers. That's 15 bottles of wine. There were usually different things like that from a company like if they do something extra, a lot of merchants appreciated their business being watched and things like that and they would send 15 tickets for this or something, you know. But Bob Visscher was real nice that way with the

uniforms he would always clean them for you for free. And Holland Racine shoes, they made a pair of high tops for all of the policeman at cost. At that time the doctor shoe was their novelty, their specialty, and they were very expensive. This was a doctor shoe, only it was higher up [show height up to his ankle] and they only charged up \$4.50 for a pair of those high shoes. One of my thoughts when I went on the police department, was communication between people. I was taught that when I went to school because after I got out of school in the military I became a criminal investigator and a military police. And preservation of evidence, those were subjects that I taught, and preservation of evidence. I don't think you probably tell me what you did last Tuesday could you?

MN: No.

OW: I could tell you what I did last Tuesday and I could tell you how warm it was and how cold it was. And eight years ago today I could tell you the same thing. I have a running diary of my life, and the weather. I could tell you, I have grandchildren, I could tell you what hour, the day, the whole business, I have got everything written down. And that was, something that I was taught when I went to school there that I never got over, but I wanted to say something else about, that diary, when you keep something like that, the reason that we kept it was, for later reference. [End side 1]

If you went to court and this would refresh your memory. See and as a little kid I remember too, I wish they did it in Holland today, but they don't. When I was little they used to have, on Christmas Eve they would have the trees in Centennial Park, and they would sing Christmas Carols at 7 o'clock, it was just a tradition

that somebody started, Mr. Vanderslice, that was his name and he was an elderly fella, I say elderly, he probably wasn't as old as I am now so I guess that makes me elderly too! [Laughter] In them days they had the city of Holland, look at it today, they had two snow plows for all the streets, and the horses would pull the plow down the sidewalks. One horse had a snow plow. Mr. Brunkors would have the horses on 7th street, and Ted Geertes father had horses, they were housed on 7th street. So there is a sport that they had when I was a boy and I have never seen it since. Kollen Park was lined up with ice boats in the winter time, lined up, maybe thirty or forty ice boats with their sails down, but when they would go out there to go, they would put their sail up and they would right across Lake Macatawa, at that time it was Black Lake. It was a sport they enjoyed and t you could go to Baker Fish House and fish all day in nice and warm in his fish house all day for 25 cents. [Pause] Oh boy. What questions have you got?

MN: Well to start, how long were you on the force?

OW: Three years, three years on the Holland Police Department. But then I got headaches day and night. And then after going to 12 doctors, the 13th one was a dianogstition in Grand Rapids he said that I have a disease known as Polycythemia which is the opposite of Leukemia, which mean my body made more red blood cells than it should, so when it was discovered they took a pint of blood out on Wednesday, another pint of Friday, another pint a week a later, and another pint after that a week later, four pints of blood in two and a half weeks, and that did away with the headaches. But what the book said what that your life expectancy is only three years when you discover polycythemia, so we went to

California and I could not get any insurance or anything like it, so there was a doctor from southern California, and he said Ollie, would you consent to an experiment, Betty and I did a lot of praying about it, and then we consented to it because as far as they knew I would not have but just a couple of three years and I could not get any insurance or anything else. And he explained that in World War II they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and another one on Nagasaki and the people right in that area were melted, gone, but on the perimeter of them shells the people died of Leukemia because that radiation killed the red cells and on that basis they wanted to use me as an experiment because I had an over abundance of red cells, so what they did is they gave me a shot of radioactive phosphate, and Nickels I'll tell you what, it was by the numbers. They set up the date that it would be like 2:30 in the afternoon on Friday and what happened was they would take it from the atomic research commission by courier to the airplane, the airplane to Los Angeles by courier to the doctors office and he would be standing there because he had a time element in there, and when I first saw him it frightened us, Betty and I, because he had goggles on and a helmet and rubber outfits and gloves and everything and that is the kind of crap they were going to pour into me by he did not want any part of it for himself, so I got the shot and the medical book says the life of a red cell is 90 days, it is born today and disappears 90 days from now. So when they get the shot they would have no known results till ninety days, three months. So I got the shot, and ninety days, sure enough it showed a shorter amount of red cells, but in the end I ended up with six shots of

radioactive phosphate and one that I drank they called it a cocktail. You figure out how long ago that is. And here I am today, so nobody knows what it was.

MN: So what years did you work on the force?

OW: '45 to '48 on the police department here in Holland, then I organized the Onslow County Sheriff Posse, in North Carolina, there were three of us who organized it and there were 32 members on the posse, and we would have Jim Gymkhana and the money that we got would be given to the fire department, the volunteer fire departments from small communities. We had a couple of manhunts. One of the most embarrassing to me was: we were on the trail of a man and it went through an old, so old it was dilapidated, colored cemetery and church and my horse put his foot down and it went into a shallow space which was a grave, but it was that old, it was from the slave days. I think that was one of my crowning moments because we donated our horses, our vans, our truck and our time with no acceptance of money or anything, it was all donated, all 32 members, and it was such a neat group of guys that were really dedicated to justice. I think I enjoyed that more than my life career with police.

MN: And you are married?

OW: To Elizabeth Taylor. December 7, 1945, Elizabeth Taylor.

MN: And you had children?

OW: Two boys.

MN: And their names are...?

OW: Al and Mike. Al graduated from high school he went to junior college for two years and then he went to college and became an x-ray technician and he worked

at that a little bit, then he went to college again and became a registered nurse, then he went back to school and became an anesthetist. Now he is 55 years old, the only money that he would take from Mum and I was for room and board in Junior College. He worked all the way up to get it. He said he would appreciate it more if he did, so he worked at the heart and lung transplant team for Dr. Schamaway at Stanford University, and he worked on that for a year or two, and then two other anesthesia invited him to be with them and they invented something today that's in every hospital in the world: The Nelcore Oxemeter. It used to be that they would have to draw blood out, spin it and take a half hour to find out what color it was and what kind and all that, now they put that thing on your finger and it records the oxygen. Now he is with medical research and he travels all over the world.

MN: I guess another question for you, what encouraged you to become a police officer for the Holland Police, why did you become an officer?

OW: Mr. Donnally. He was a, at that time they had what they called Police and Fire Commissioners, and they were actually elected by the people. Well Bill Mayes, Bertle Slagh and John Donnelly were the Holland Police and Fire Commissioners, and when Mr. Donnelly, he was like a second father to me. When I was a little boy it started already, cutting his grass and sprinkling, shoveling snow in the wintertime, and big deal on Sunday he would give me a quarter or 50 cents, but he was like my second father. During the war years he had knew what I had done and the schooling that I had gotten. He says, "Ollie, I want you when you come home to come on the police department and I have more plans for you." Well I

got on the police department and Mr. Donnelly died. And this is between you and I but Jack VanHoff didn't like that. Because he didn't approve of me, he didn't interview me, he didn't tell me what he wanted, see? I had laid my plans all on the table for Mr. Donnelly, what I had seen and learned in school and instead of a little kid being afraid of you, they would come to you for help if they needed. That was a reverse of Jake VanHoff's Theory. That was the chief that I worked for. That was when I said well I have had enough. I told him that in plain English then, and I through my gun on the table and my badge and I walked out. The following day Bill Maynes and Bertle Slagh came to my house on 21st street, and they said Ollie, Ollie, Ollie don't do that, we have got other plans. I said not with that man there. He says we have an obstacle to get rid of him, and the obstacle was Mayor Harrington was an uncle to Jake VanHoff. Now that is dirty rotten politics in the little town of Holland, but I left it at that and that is what happened.

MN: Did you ever know anything about how Jake VanHoff became chief?

OW: I don't know. But he was called Fleetfoot?

MN: Why's that?

OW: The reason we would call him that, Ray Skermann and Wally Skermann had a Model T Ford. They would go down River Avenue. Jake VanHoff would be directing traffic with the pedestrians on Saturday night. Ray and Wally would come down there and they had a switch on their dash, and they would push the switch in and there would be no tail light, and he would run from River Avenue to central avenue to stop him because he didn't have a tail light, and as soon as he

would get along side of the car they would pull the switch out, and Jake would ask them why they don't have a tail light. Wally would say "don't tell me there is no tail light because I checked it when I left home." And he would go out and the light was on, and they did that several times. He wouldn't wait, he'd run. That is how we accumulated the name fleetfoot. But he was thirsty for tickets. He figured that the more people who were arrested or fined, the better off his office would show. That was his theory. It was not the theory I got when I went to school. So I even promoted something that, oh good Lord he was so angry about that. I got the permission from the people who lived on 22nd street, I told them what I wanted to do, and they thought 'oh what a wonderful idea.' So on Tuesday night and Thursday night from seven o'clock to nine o'clock I had barricades on Pine Avenue and Maple Avenue, no cars on the street. This side didn't have anything because that was where they played ball and I had the popcorn man from Grand Rapids come and he would put his trailer, and truck there and that little guy would pump popcorn out of the machine and then I had Nick Hoffman's Calliope. I don't know if you ever heard of it, I don't know if it exists. I'll bet it does. It was mounted on a trailer, oh and it played such beautiful music, and I had that parked along side of it and then city sign company made me a whole bunch of sign similar to that size [shows a piece of paper] and they said couples only, boys only, girls only, trios, waltz and I would put that out there in the street and the kids would come down there roller skating and that lasted all summer long. And Nickels, the greatest joy of that was, the next morning some little kid would call up and say thank you.

MN: Oh wow!

OW: But Jake did not approve of that because he was not part of it. The other guys volunteered their services, John Pierce, Chuck Taligate, Chuck Martin, all of us and some little kid would come up to you and you would help them put their skate on, you'd just feel them touch you because you were a policeman. Those were the things I was brought up with. The city of Holland lost because I didn't stay with it, but I'll guarantee there would have been a lot different attitude toward policemen if I'd of stayed there, now that is my theory.

MN: Was the community really supportive of you guys?

OW: Absolutely! Connie VanVoers, oh I don't know, somewhere there is more stuff on Connie VanVoers, how she wrote about it, thought it was the greatest thing. Then in the wintertime I was going to get the boys for boxing and wrestling in the gym and would you believe that Jake VanHoff beat me to the Holland High, the Christian School and Hope College that the gym was not available that if there was an accident there the college would be responsible, and with that hanging over their head they did not dare to let me use the gym. That is the kind of chief we had. So that is just a bitter taste in my mouth. But all and all I think I have had a wonderful life and a wonderful wife, and I am thankful for every bit of it.

MN: What was a typical violation that you would have to handle as an officer?

OW: Most of it was traffic. Traffic. Serious crimes, I really didn't, the one fella that I caught in the store there, there was a bank robbery in 1929, but other than that we didn't have any murders, or anything of that nature. Of course, at that time too, it is almost a blessing in disguise that we didn't have, because Ernie Bear was the

only detective we had, and he had no schooling in it, so he would have just had to use common knowledge to do what he had to do. There was a bank robbery one time in Grand Rapids, and a colored fellow did it. He came out of Grand Rapids, turned the corner in Hudsonville and he went down to the woods over there in Dunningville and it happened to be September 30th because my son was born at 3 o'clock in the morning and at 5 o'clock I went to the hospital with Betty, and right after 9 o'clock the hospital received a call that they were going to pick me up, the police, so Ralph Woldring, Gill Tors, Mike DeKraker I believe where in the car, and all four of us went to the Dunningville area looking for the guy, and we found his car, but he got on the bus and went down to the bus station in Holland and John Dykema said that he looked funny so two policemen got on the bus over there on 19th and River, just like they were passengers, they walked up to him and grabbed him and took him off, but he was taken to the station and Badifor and Coos were there names, they were from Grand Rapids detectives, they said that we will be over in a minute, in just a short while, and they came over to, they were two colored fellows, detectives, and we had him upstairs and they took him and put him in a room, and Nickels, I swear it was not two minutes, they opened the door, they says "would you send up a stenographer," that two minutes we heard him screaming and hollering and yelling, they beat the living crap out of that guy, they knew he had done it, they took care of him right there and then they took him to Grand Rapids, but there weren't any vicious crimes while I was in Holland. No.

MN: Holland has become a more diverse community, in later years, what was Holland like back then, were there minorities, a lot of them, blacks or Hispanics?

OW: No. You might say all Dutch. All Dutch. Like I say, the Jewish was Louis Padnos, and he was well respected by all the people, there was a number of Irish people like the Donnellys. Donnelly had the Donnelly Glass Company which was located only on River avenue, it was not a major company like it is today, it was just minor, but to my knowledge there was no colored at all in Holland in 1945 or '46. One time when we met the train at 12:30 it would come in from Grand Rapids from Chicago, I have got it somewhere in my notes and he walked across that lot, Beach Milling Company used to be on the side there, so took the car and we drove over there and we met the person, and it was a man. He said he had married a white girl and she lived over here and he didn't know where, and I remember that because we never encountered people in Holland while I was on the Department. Even like Jewish, I am sure there were a lot more Jewish people but the predominate one was Louis Padnos, who I always admired, even when he played cards with the firemen and the Irish people (with the Donnellys) and so forth.

MN: I am curious about the train. You talked about escorting the mail carrier, did you have to watch the train ever to check to see who came off the train or...

OW: Basically that was our reason, but I think the big reason was for the mail and the money with Jake Boardman. But there was never any violence at the depot, never was.

MN: Could you describe the Holland community, what you remember it being like when you were an officer?

OW: Well, it is like I described, the poor kids couldn't even play on Sunday. It was quiet. At one time I knew how many churches there were. It seemed like everybody went to church and you would hear church bells every Sunday morning from all over the city. They would ring the bell at either 9:30 or 10 o'clock, and kids would be walking on the street. There was no activity on the weekend you know, with the kids. But it was, like I said that Neis' Hill in the wintertime, and sliding, and they used to have ball diamonds to play ball on 19th street. There was one on 120th street.

MN: Do you think it was kind of strict? As an officer did you have to be strict with the community?

OW: Well, some of the rules were, but people adhered to them. It wasn't that you had trouble with people, they just didn't give you that many problems. When you have that many people and you get one call or something, you don't call that violence or anything. No, no it was, I think, very easy going.

MN: What kinds of rules were there back then in the community that the police had to enforce?

OW: Like I said, no Sunday tennis, no ball playing, things of that nature. As far as I am concerned, today is every day participation with going swimming and boating and all that. Now I think people, they feel that they go to church on Sunday morning, that gives them the rest of the day to go do what they want to do, beach or fish.

MN: What do you think, how do you think crime has changed, I know it is more difficult and there are more problems today, but, how do you think it has changed since you were an officer, how have you seen it change?

OW: Well, as I have said before, the Miranda rights of a prisoner, if you don't read them that they can throw the case out of court. When I was an officer we had never heard of that, we didn't have that kind of thing. I think an officer of my day had to deal with the problems the way he sees fit. A policeman today almost has to go by what the book says. I think that is the best response I can give you, then and now. Listening to my grandson who is deputy sheriff, now he says you have to do this, and you have to read him his rights, which we had never heard of when I was a policeman.

MN: Would you say you have to use more intuition?

OW: Yes. You were on your own. Okay, here is an illustration, I was directing traffic on 8th and River. At about 8 o'clock in the evening Chuck Dulyea and John Piers came up to the corner with their squad car. They said "get in" and I got in and I said, "what's up?" They said, "we got a call and we need all three of us." The home was (okay I am just going to say) on 13th street. We went into the house and there was a lady that I am guessing was about 30 years old, about 120-30 pounds. She was like out of her mind, so we got her and we put her on bed and John Piers sat on one side of the bed holding her wrist, and Chuck Dulyea sat on that side holding her other arm straight out, and I laid across her knees, and I think three and a half hours because the doctor was not available to give her a shot. Then they could take her to the asylum. That was our judgement with that lady.

That happened, you bring that up, and I am saying that was our own judgement. I remember that she got her fingers on John's wristwatch and she broke the band trying to pull away from him. Now that was a lady who only weighed 120-30 pounds. What a power of strength when they were mentally ill. I remember that very distinctly.

MN: Did they train you? What kind of training did the police give you?

OW: None. Not a bit of training when you were a policeman in my era. Of course I had the advantage of getting it in the military, because I went to PMG school and military police school. That was why Mr. Donnelly wanted me on the department.

MN: So you basically learn, what you thought intuitively to do in a situation you learn from experience or from the guy next to you.

OW: Right. Together.

MN: Do you remember any, were there any particular events or experiences that influenced you or changed the way you looked at Holland or your role as an officer? Any particular call or something of that nature?

OW: Well other than what I told you with my version of being friendly with the kids and letting them to grow up not being afraid of a policeman, that the policeman would be their friend when in need.

MN: Were there any kinds of challenges that you faced as an officer, anything that you faced that was difficult?

OW: No, except for what I told you with the chief, that was it.

MN: You talked about the children and that sounds like a very rewarding experience to work in the community as an officer, what kinds of rewards do you think there were, being a police officer in Holland?

OW: Actually it was a job, just like anyone else really, except you had decisions to make and sometimes they were real quick, you know.

MN: Were you ever given any kinds of guidelines to follow as an officer?

OW: No. Not in Holland. Not at that time. They did not even have a book on it. No. In fact, just to tell you how outdated even the laws governing the city were--in 1946 when I was on the department, when you read the book (on the city of Holland, the rules and their bylaws) firemen were supposed to walk their horses in the morning and in the afternoon. But they could not go any more than a block away from the fire department. That was still on the books in 1946. Yeah. Now that is how negative it was. There were no guidelines for a policeman, it was another job as far as they were concerned. As a matter of fact, we got a badge and a gun when I went on. In the wintertime when you had to wear an overcoat, you had to take that badge off and put it on your overcoat. Then when you took your overcoat off, you had to put that badge back on your blouse. VanHoff says, well if you want to do that, I'll give you a special police badge you will have to put a dollar deposit on it. That is in my desk yet. That is from 1946. I still have got that badge and Jake VanHoff owes me a dollar if I want to give it back to him. He won't get it because there is somebody, Bob DeVries (when I showed it to him) said 'Ollie I would like to put that in our museum.' There is no way you are ever going to get that. There is a grandson who is going to get my two badges, and that

is Tim, who is on the police department now. I got one for that job and one for the sheriff posse that I was a lieutenant with.

MN: What would you want people to know about working for the Holland Police that might have been covered, might now have been, what is it that, when it came down to it, what it was like working for the Holland Police, what would you tell somebody?

OW: Well, it is the good and the bad. I don't know, you could decipher that part of it, because you could always say there you are dealing with the element of people who are not law abiding. You don't go down the street and have coffee with the mayor, with your neighbors, or your friends. You are usually in the jail house with people who have violated the law. It is not the best element of the population that you deal with, even any violation you encounter, you have to put up with them. That would be about the best I could describe it.

MN: Well is there anything you would want to add that I might not of asked?

OW: Knowing the way the population is today, and the population of the middle forties, there is no way I would want to be a policeman today. My grandson is a policeman, and I really don't know other than the sheriff invited him on the department because of his background, but I would not encourage it with the disrespect that people have for the law today. Young people can drive cars that, when we were young like that, we never dreamt of automobiles like that (that was during the depression). Today they think they've got to have a car even before they get out of high school and the more noise they can make, the better they like it. A policeman has to handle them very carefully. There is day and night

difference between the attitude of today and the people then, because I look at a policeman with respect and I know that, with the way the world is today, he could talk to me now, and down the road 15 minutes he could be dead, because somebody has a grudge against policemen, period. Not him, but because he is a policeman. That is the way they are, and I respect all of them.

MN: What do you think changed? Or what do you think prompted that kind of change?

OW: I think parents have a lot to do with it. I think parents had better control of their children back then and they were taught to respect other people. We never addressed an adult by his first name, we always addressed them as mister or Mrs. Today, kids don't think anything of calling elders by their first names. That is the way they were brought up then and today.

MN: So a policeman was a respected authority?

OW: Absolutely.

MN: What kind of effect did being a police officer have on your family? Was it difficult? Did it work out like any other job?

OW: No, worked out fine. There was no problem with it. When Betty and I got married, she knew that I was going to be a policeman and it was that way all the way through my military career. Nope, no problem.

MN: Were there ever any big events in the police department you remember?

OW: You mean during my time?

MN: Yes.

OW: No, nothing outstanding, not like a big bank robbery or anything like that. When I was with the sheriffs department in North Carolina, there was a teenage boy who killed a teenage girl. They went to church, or to catechism, we were after that one. And there was another one the year after that one, but in Holland, no.

MN: Were there any particular types of people who committed crimes back then, I know nothing was severe, I guess the question is, were there certain people who caused a lot of problems back then?

OW: No. See now, what you are asking me is just what I heard on the Radio, the TV last night. See right now there is a big controversy in Grand Rapids, I don't know if you know that.

MN: No.

OW: Well, you will. I think on Monday and Tuesday before the court opens there is going to be a multitude of colored people standing there, they want some laws revised, because the police are picking on the colored. That is their theory. It says that so many percent are colored and a certain percent white, and they think that the police are more or less picking on the colored. That is going on in Grand Rapids now, and it will go on now and it will go on 10 years from now too, just like it does in Chicago, or all over. Now in Holland, the Mexican people, have an uprising, they want to be recognized here in Holland. Tulip Time was started with Ms. Rogers way back when I was in Junior High School. Now they have got a Latino Day during our Tulip Time. Now my answer is, I don't have anything to do with city politics, but I would tell them people, do not have it on Tulip Time, have it the first week of May, or the last week of May, Tulip Time picked those

days, why do you want to go against that. You see what I mean when you get your different nationalities involved, in 1945, '46, just like I say, Mr. Donnelly, they were Irish, and Louis Padnos was, I mentioned many times, was Jewish.

MN: There was a different sort of community back then.

OW: It was different, day and night different.

[Discussion of photos, clippings, and Geoffrey Reynolds, then End Tape]

T02-1652. Wierenga, Ollie (1920-).

Papers, 1940-2002. 0.25 linear ft.

Born and raised in Holland, he worked for Holland Motor Express, Inc.(1940-1942), and later served as a City of Holland police officer (1946-1950). Collection includes photographs and employee roster of Holland Motor Express, Inc., Wierenga in police uniform, his notes on the history of Holland and an oral history audio cassette and transcript of his memories of Holland as a young man and as a police officer.