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Yelding, John Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
John Yelding

(unedited)

Conducted November 27, 1996
by Anne Colenbrander

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with John Yelding
November 27, 1996
Interviewer: Anne Colenbrander

AC: This is an interview with Professor John Yelding from Hope College, for the Oral History Project, by Anne Colenbrander. We're in John Yelding's office at Hope College. It's November 27, 1996, 2:00 p.m. Can I have you state your full name?

JY: John A. Yelding.

AC: When were you born?

JY: [date removed], 1946.

AC: Where were you born?

JY: South Haven, Michigan. South Haven Community Hospital.

AC: Can you tell me a little bit about your family, like your spouse and your children?

JY: My wife and I have been married for, well, it will be nineteen years come March 18th of next year. She was born and raised in Kalamazoo. She is a graduate of Loy Norrix High School and the University of Michigan. She has her Master's Degree from Western Michigan, and she is a counselor for West Middle School, here in Holland.

AC: I had her when I went there.

JY: Well, good.

AC: What kind of education have you had?

JY: I graduated from South Haven High School and did all my under graduate work at Michigan State University, which makes for an interesting household with a U of M

spouse. I feel it's my Christian duty to do something with her. (chuckles) I have a Master's degree from Western Michigan University and about sixty, maybe sixty-five hours beyond that. I'm working to complete a doctorate right now from Western Michigan University.

AC: In what?

JY: In educational leadership. I'd love to sit here and tell you how much fun that is, but it wouldn't be fair to be dishonest. (laughs)

AC: It's hard work, I'm sure. Where have you lived during your life?

JY: Actually, other than when I went away for school, pretty much in this immediate area. I lived in a little town called Covert, which is just south of South Haven, for about three, four years, because I taught in Covert for four years. Then I moved back to South Haven and taught there for just over eight years. Then I took a position in Coloma to go into administration, and I ended up living in Coloma for about three or three and a half years before I came back to South Haven. I've lived in a lot more houses than I have different communities. (laughs)

AC: So basically, small towns your whole life?

JY: Yeah, right within about a twenty, twenty-five mile area, all of them.

AC: What are some organizations that you've been involved in?

JY: Oh, lots of them. I presently serve on the Board of Directors for the Boys and Girls Club of America. I also serve on the Board for the Lutheran Social Services of Michigan. I don't know if you know anything about that organization, but that's a statewide, and probably about a sixty million dollar a year business providing a

variety of services, primarily for elderly people who are in need of a wide range of housing, from traditional rest homes, to rest homes and hospital-type environments that provide pretty significant levels of health care. I'm on the board for Lakeshore Link, which is an area organization, kind of a partnership between business and schools. ASCD. I'm trying to think of current things. I've been in lots of different organizations, just kind of depends on where you are. I was an Optimist for a good while. There are always lots of different organizations and things. Those are ones that right now, especially the Boys and Girls Club and Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, take the majority of the time that I spend doing club and organization type activities.

AC: So you're basically involved in the organizational and delegating tasks?

JY: Well, the level that I'm involved in these organizations is, we meet regularly. For example, Boys and Girls Club, we meet monthly, and then we have committee meetings other than that. Literally, it's what it suggests, it's a board of directors. It makes decisions about budget and programming, and works with decisions on personnel. It's like a supervisory type of board for the greater Holland Boys and Girls Club. The same is true for the Michigan Social Services of Michigan, only, obviously, that's on a much bigger scale.

AC: How long have you been involved with these groups?

JY: I've been with the Boys and Girls Club Board for, I guess approaching a year and a half now.

AC: Is that a relatively new organization?

JY: No. Well, Boys and Girls Club, let's say has been pretty actively involved around here for at least six or seven years. We're at kind of a critical point right now, because we're trying to make some decisions about establishing our own building. Right now we have satellite programs, and we have what we call a central unit. But we are using facilities that are owned through Holland Public Schools, and we really look forward to having a Boys and Girls Club central unit that will be kind of a centerpiece of the whole operation. So that's an exciting thing that's going on.

AC: How did you get involved in these organizations?

JY: Usually people call you and say, "Would you be willing to do this?" or, "Would you be willing to do that?" Actually, it kind of comes with the jobs. You come into contact with people, and they know that you're interested in young people and helping them, and they will often ask you to be on boards. I chose these two because they have some special meaning for me. There are lots of other opportunities out there. In the case of Boys and Girls Club, I was really brought kind of into that cycle by John Donnelly, from the Donnelly Corporation. In the case of Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, that was through some earlier committee work that I had done with my church, and met people at the state level, and they ended up coming back and calling and asking me to serve as a representative from this region.

AC: So you sound like you're involved in the Lutheran Church? What's your impression of the church?

JY: What's my impression of the Lutheran Church? Interesting. I enjoy it. I think like any church and their related activities, an awful lot depends on the person who's

serving as minister at the time. They have so much to do with the philosophy of the church. The last two people that we've had have been, I think, really good, in terms of opening the doors of the church, establishing a broader base, looking to the future as opposed to just focusing on the past. It's very traditional litany and practices, and yet there's a sense of the church being alive, and there's lots of things going on: supportive youth programs, and those types of things. I sense kind of, I would say, a renewed commitment, but I think it's probably more accurate to describe it as a new commitment of activity and service within the community, and those are things that are important to me. I think they're appropriate roles for churches.

AC: What church are you a member of?

JY: First English Lutheran in South Haven.

AC: Have you seen changes in your church for, I don't know, how ever long you've been a member?

JY: Yes, but the biggest changes, again, I think come with the ministers. There's just a totally different attitude of openness, and an interest in growth and moving membership forward. Still, like I said, the litany, and so forth, is still very traditional, but other things changing significantly. I certainly can honestly say that in the time that I've been there, one issue is just the idea of diverse membership. I mean, we're still not very diverse, but, at least, I sense a greater openness to diversity within the church, and more of a reaching out, and I think those are good things, and those should never even be issues in a Christian setting, but reality says that they are in our society. There's one thing that, in a sense, it's sad, but true, that

we talk a little bit about in our "Encounter with the Cultures" class. We ask the question, "What is the most segregated hour in America?" It's fundamentally eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, when people go to church.

AC: What do you make of the increasing diversification in the Holland community? Do you see it?

JY: Oh, you definitely see it. You'd have to close your eyes to not see it. I probably have some fairly strong opinions about that. One, I find it ironic that the reason that the people are coming, and the reason for the community growth, and so forth, is the exact 180 degrees opposite of the stereotypes that we promote in our society about members of diverse groups, which is that they don't want to work. That is, overwhelmingly, what draws them here. There are jobs here. If there were no jobs they wouldn't be coming. Perhaps it's from being a member of a minority group myself, I'd like to think it's more than that, and having a little more enlightenedness and openness to the subject. But see, I view the diversity as not a problem, but as an opportunity. It's an opportunity to come together, and really benefit from what is right now, two primary diverse cultures in this community. The great percentages are, of course, Dutch and Hispanic. When I look at the potential the promise... They're both extremely rich in the cultural traditions, and what people seem to believe, or want to believe, is that you have to choose one or the other, and somehow expect or force others to make that choice and join. When in reality, I see the beauty of it being a coming together of the cultures and a sharing and taking advantage of all the richness that they both have to share, and I see no reason why we can't celebrate

both, and develop a healthy respect for each. Unfortunately not a lot of that has happened yet. I see some signs that make me a little bit more optimistic for the future, but up till this point, many people have kind of just stuck their head in the sand and said, "This isn't really happening, it's just like it was fifteen years ago." It's like the little two-year old, who, when he wants a problem to disappear, he closes his eyes, and when he opens them, he fully expects it to be gone. That's just not going to happen here. The problems, themselves, are driven by, one, a lack of willingness to welcome diversity, and to fall victim to fear of the unknown, and that's overwhelmingly what it is. The other is, if the community is to survive and thrive, were going to have to get off of this business of, for lack of a better descriptor, white flight: as soon as one person moves in, the neighborhood is gone and we got to run. There are lots of places in our decided that, "You know what, I don't think there is anything to fear. I believe they will cut their lawns. I believe they will take care of their homes. I don't believe their kids are going to hurt my kids. In fact we all might benefit from being together, and guess what, I think I'm just going to stay here, and make a go of it." As soon as a sizable percentage of the population is willing to make that type of a decision, then a lot of your problems are over, because you're on the road to a coming together and building, instead of destruction. Because one thing I would say to anybody, in terms of flight away from minorities, or different religions, or different cultures, whatever, you can run, but you really can't hide. It gets expensive to keep running. No matter what, you can spend your entire life running, but ultimately, as I like to say, we're coming to the theater, or in this

case, a neighborhood, near you soon. It's just a matter of time. So why keep running? The ironic part of it is, we want the same things that you do. We want a nicer neighborhood, a nicer house, better education opportunities for our kids, a safer environment. You know, where else would we look for it? In the inner-city? Give me a break, you know. Common sense dictates that cycle will not be broken until we stop the nonsense and running.

AC: So where do you see Holland, do you see this as a continuum? Do you see Holland making progress? You said there might be some signs...

JY: I think that, at this point, I see some reasons to be optimistic that we might, in the not to distant future, be able to stabilize ourselves. That would be the next goal to me, because I don't consider it to be stable right now. I think I still see a lot of running going on. That's in spite of the fact that there are many, many good people who are working hard to make things happen. Positive things, more than ever before. A lot of them are here at the college, but there are lots of others out in the community too. But I don't consider the community stable, right now, from a standpoint of looking to the future. When I say I'm optimistic, it's with the idea that I could foresee the time in the not to distant future when it could be stable, and once you reach stability, then you can start building. You get off the quicksand, and once you reach some solid ground you can start building something that will last.

AC: So, by stability, you mean...?

JY: Stability where you overcome that fear is the rule, instead of the exception, because you don't know. That sense that, I need to move to the next school district, or the

next community, or whatever... That cycle has to be broken if you're going to get anywhere. Ultimately, our country as a whole, and certainly we're just a microcosm of that, has to realize that our future is not secure because a small part of the population is doing well, because if we don't stop and think how dependent that small part is on the big part for their lives to go. They say, "Yeah, we got the corporations, and we got this, and we got that." What if the workers just pull up stakes and say, "Hey I can't stand it around here anymore, I'm just going to leave." Who's going to do the work? We do not understand and appreciate how interdependent we are. We have a better picture of interdependence globally, than we do regionally or as a country. I think we're going to have to overcome that to move forward. But, yeah, I think there's hope, there's good positive signs, and I would hope with the leadership that I see in many positions in the area, and with a better education and attitude for our young people, which is where it really ultimately has to change. I mean, laws serve their purpose, but ultimately the concepts have to be internalized. You need to move from an attitude that, "Well, maybe I will tolerate this," whether it's race, religion, whatever, to, "I will learn to appreciate this, and value this diversity." Because tolerance still comes from a base of power, that one is the haves and one is the have-nots, and as long as that exists, there's always going to be a back and forth of somebody trying to get even from last time. Kind of like negotiations.

AC: Yes. How do you see the Dutch heritage or culture of Holland interacting with the other cultures in the community?

JY: It's improving. There are some good things going on in some of the churches and though organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, that's one reason I chose to get associated with that. There are numerous good things going on in the schools. But, to not paint an unrealistic picture, just going on what I have actually seen, it appears to me that there is more of a willingness on the part of the diverse cultures to participate in, and value, and appreciate the Dutch tradition, than there is of the reverse. The Dutch really saying I can appreciate and value these diverse positions. I know one is an internationally famous event, but when you look at Tulip Festival, I see all kinds of people downtown participating in the activities, and enjoying it and so forth. Then when you look at the festival that occurs at the end of summer, early fall with the Hispanic celebration, you just don't see that same level of diversity. Which means that the bridge is running more one way than it is the other, right now. I'm not overly critical of that, in the sense that it takes time, but if we don't complete the bridge so it runs both sides, we're not going to get where we need to go.

AC: Right. What are some qualities that seem to stand out concerning the city of Holland?

JY: I think the tradition and history of it being a Dutch community, the festivities like the Tulip Festival, the really model diversity of the police force. I think it's a model for the state. I don't know how it was every done. My understanding is it's the most diverse and most representative police force of any in the state of Michigan, which, I think, is a great accomplishment. A lot of the traditions that go with the Dutch. It's really a clean community. It's a community that takes pride in things. It's got a

good school system, beautiful facilities. A spirit of being willing to work together, to pull together, at least on a lot of things. I think the relationship that the community has with Hope College is great. So many times you see the college community battling with the rest of the community: these terrible kids, and this and that. For the most part, I really don't see a whole lot of that. I think those are real strengths.

AC: What are some negative aspects of Holland?

JY: I was pretty sure that would be the next question. We still have a lot to learn about one another. The big step in that is establishing a willingness, a desire, to learn. Ideally a desire, not just a willingness. I think that there's an image, in certain parts, that the whole community isn't as welcome. That's just not along the lines of race and ethnicity. You can hear the students here on campus complain that 8th Street itself, as pretty as it is, isn't necessarily a real welcoming environment for young people, or for people from diverse cultures. In not all, but in many cases, there appears to be no effort being made to make it more welcoming from the standpoint of maybe hiring some people in the stores who are bilingual, broadening the base of service from the standpoint of the types of things that you offer. Whether it's where you can get a haircut or what types of products you offer, all those types of things. There are, certainly, exceptions. I can think of one in particular, I love to go there, and I'm not really a candy-type person, but I've never had anything but exceptional experiences in the Peanut Store. People have always been wonderful, serve you immediately, but never any pushiness to make a selection or get in and out, always willing to do a little something extra. That's the way I think every business should be

run. So that's good. I think the restaurants have some advantages, perhaps, over some of the more traditional stores downtown. Ultimately, it's in their interest to broaden their base, because the base is going to keep changing, and if you can't find what you want there, you can go to the malls and other places. There are a lot of people who still enjoy the environment of a downtown mall and that type of thing.

AC: Do you see any drawbacks to living in or near Holland?

JY: Not really for me, per se. I think, for the most part, I could probably get housing just about anywhere that I could afford. My kids can get a good education and so forth. The African-American community here is really small. Even if it's up to three or four percent, that's really small. But it will grow, because there's opportunity here. That doesn't affect me a whole lot from the standpoint that I'm used to being in majority culture, that's where I've spent most of my life. So it's more a concern of my kids being comfortable. I guess probably the main point to make is, I don't necessarily believe that because it's that way for me, that it's that way for the average person working a minimum wage job, or for that matter, working at one of the business or industry, and making decent money. It doesn't necessarily mean that they would have the same doors open, that in most cases, I probably would.

AC: You've mentioned before about the business opportunities in Holland. What do you make of the industry in Holland?

JY: It's great. Tremendous opportunity, not only for employees, but for employers. I see no reason to believe that this is suddenly going to turn off or turn around or something. When you look at the growth pattern, Grand Rapids, Zeeland, Holland, if

you look at that as almost one large industrial business community, there appears to be nothing but promise of more and more growth throughout this area. That's wonderful for the people in the area. Unfortunately, what happens is, the growth that occurs economically is usually trailed, significantly, in terms of the sociological adjustments that need to be made to come with that. Economic advances are made before we adjust in terms of social stratification. We don't want to break the social stratification. Race and ethnicity is one issue there, but it's not just that. If race and ethnicity were not an issue, we still wouldn't want to break the patterns between socio-economic classes. It's kind of like the rock star, who never really had anything before, but makes a couple records, and is suddenly rich. Those who have been rich right along don't look at that rock star as being deserving of being rich and fitting into the culture. That's exactly the type of thing that happens as people begin to move up the economic ladder. They don't necessarily have some of the educational things and other values that fit another level on the socio-economic ladder, or even if they do, it's perceived that they don't. So, assumptions get you in trouble.

AC: Where would you speculate Holland would be without all the growing industry?

JY: I think it would be largely the same way that it was before the industry started, and it would still be a relatively quiet, little Dutch community, with great tradition, strong church ties, a great, once a year Tulip Festival. There would be little or no reasons, realistically, for people of diverse backgrounds to even be passing through here, let alone, stopping to stay.

AC: What about Holland do you think has helped the industry grow?

JY: It's obvious to me that there is a welcoming attitude, a facilitating attitude, in terms of using tax breaks that are available through the state and local governmental units. Through things such as willingness to use right of eminent domain to secure properties, those type of things. A lot of times, particularly as you're expanding out into areas, it's a matter to be willing to provide sewer and water services, and adequate roadways for heavy trucks coming and going, and those types of things. It's obvious to me that Holland City, and the surrounding governmental units, have been really supportive of those types of issues, as a whole, or the growth couldn't occur. It only takes one or two people to stand in the way of any type of economic progress, and all you've got to do is go to smaller communities and watch, the places where I've seen myself, ten years after a McDonald's wanted to come in, one was finally allowed to be built. In some communities, that's a short period of time. It all takes just one or two influential people to turn everything off.

AC: Can you tell me what you've heard other people, like family and friends that don't live in Holland, what have they said about Holland?

JY: Usually, when people are going to say things, I find it whether it's talking about Holland, or it's talking about someplace else, it just seems to be our nature, we don't say good things, we say things that are bad. So in spite of the fact I know I have relatives and friends who drive up here to shop and eat and all those types of things, that's not what they talk about, they don't talk about the positive experiences they have. They talk about the latest gang activity, or the shooting that occurred, or what's happening in terms of racial/ethnic percentages in the schools, or the opening

of the charter school or two, or the difference in philosophy and opportunity between Holland Christian Schools and Holland Public Schools. All those types of issues are the things that get talked about. We seem to be a society that doesn't really spend much time talking about what's right. We enjoy talking about what's wrong, particularly if it's somebody else's community. We tend to not see the dirt in our own. We see everybody else's houses being dirty, but we see our own as being clean as the white glove checking it. I don't think others view us any differently than probably we tend to view them. It's probably a societal thing. It's not to say you don't hear good things: "Yeah, I had a great time at the Tulip Festival," or, "Yeah, I enjoyed going to this or that at Hope," or, "Yeah, the schools really look good," or, "That's a good organization." You'll hear that, but for every one time you hear that, you have somebody calling you, "Did you hear about the shooting up there? Did you hear about this? Did you hear about that?" You want to say, "No, I didn't. I bet that was the only in the state that happened today." You just get a little bit sarcastic sometimes.

AC: OK. Well, that should be about it.