

11-25-1997

## Van Ark, Mike Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Ena Brooks

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### Recommended Citation

**Repository citation:** Brooks, Ena, "Van Ark, Mike Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"" (1997). *Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"*. Paper 138.

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**Published in:** 1996 - 1998 - *Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years" (H88-0234)* - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, November 25, 1997. Copyright © 1997 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Oral History Interview with  
Mike Van Ark

Conducted November 25, 1997  
by Ena Brooks

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project

Interview with Mike Van Ark

November 25, 1997

Interviewer: Ena Brooks

EB: We'll start by having you state your full name, where you were born, and the hospital you were born in and the date.

MVA: My total name is Myron Dale Van Ark. I was born [date removed], 1929, Holland Hospital. My father's name was Marinus, a good Dutch name, so they couldn't name me that. So they named me Myron instead.

EB: And your mother's name?

MVA: Her name was Alberta Beek. She lived between Holland and Grand Rapids, in Jamestown, which is a very small town.

EB: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

MVA: I have one brother who is nine years older than I am, and he's also living, so he's now seventy-seven, and I'm sixty-eight.

EB: Well that was a huge gap in between you two!

MVA: Right. So I'm kind of a Depression-era person really. I was born just before the Depression, 1929, and I really grew up then during the Depression. My father was a butcher, and we lived over on Twenty-sixth Street and what would be Lawndale Court, and my father came from the Netherlands in 1900. His mother died just before they came, so his father brought four brothers and one sister. So the sister really acted as a mother then when they came over. She really helped to bring up the family. My grandfather was a blacksmith, and later he worked at Holland

Furnace Company in the machine shop there. My father only had an eighth-grade education, and that was true for three of the brothers. The youngest brother then became a doctor. My father worked at what was called Haveman and later J. Hulst & Son, which was located on Twenty-fourth and College Avenue. This is where OK Tire is now. You had a whole small area of businesses there. You had that, you had Bartel's Shoe Store, Buter's Grocery Store, Bert Koning's Barber Shop, Van's Drug Store, and early in the '30s there was a hardware store right next to Hulst. That burned, later Mannes Super Service built there. I don't know when Hulst Grocery Store was torn down, but then that became OK Tire then later.

EB: You said you grew up in the Depression. Why don't you talk a little about what you remember about living here in Holland during the Depression.

MVA: Well, actually, for us, my father had a steady job in the store. So, all I can sort of remember was that I don't know what he got paid during the Depression, but when I grew up, he got about twenty-five dollars a week, which had to take care of us. So we always had a large garden and raised a lot of vegetables. We had some relatives that lived between Holland and Grand Rapids where my mother came from, and we'd visit them. So it was a case of usually practically no commercial entertainment. We usually went to uncles and aunts, or friends, and they would take me along. That was very common, you know, you wouldn't have a babysitter at that time. Quite often they played cards, or did some talking. If my mother had people over, quite often they would do sewing, rather than sitting and talking. Well, they talked too, but they would do their own sewing or knitting, or

crocheting, or tatting, whatever you might have. So actually, I really, when the Depression was going on probably didn't realize it completely. But I knew we didn't have a lot of money through my whole time. I also knew that as I grew older, that if I was going to go on to school, that it would be up to me to earn the money for that because my parents just didn't have the money. My brother went to college and stayed at home, and then when the time came, that was also true of myself. When I was probably around the sixth-grade or so, fifth or sixth grade, summertime, we would pick cherries at Derr's, which was located where the East Middle School is located now. They also raised gladioli bulbs. When I was in the seventh grade, and I think about until the eighth grade, then in the fall, we'd have to, I'd be employed after school to clean gladioli bulbs. You scrape off the old bulb so that the new one would be all set to be sold then. When I got to be fourteen, I worked in the same store that my father worked. Of course at that time it was during World War II. So it was rather interesting because a lot of things you couldn't get. People would come in and ask for things like coconut or chocolate or Jello. They'd have those things kind of in the back room for the regular customers. You'd put those in a separate bag so people you know would have those. I can remember getting meat was a problem, and if you wanted more meat, a lot of times you could buy it on the black market at that time, because there were stamps of course, for meat, and sugar, and other things. So there was one local meat processor who had good quality meat, but then you had to pay the price if you wanted the meat at that time. I went to Longfellow School. This was a school that

was built back around 1903 or 1906. I think my father might have gone to the same school. This was a school with two upper stories which each had four rooms. The basement had two rooms. There was also a furnace room, and there was a so-called room where we had a gym. Joe Moran who was the phys. ed. instructor and the tennis courts were named after him a lot later, would have gym classes there. We'd learn things like the Virginia Reel, that type of thing. Then on the top floor of the school was an area where we'd have plays and other kinds of things. So that was really a neighborhood school. When I was in the sixth grade, I was the safety patrol captain, and this was the same year as Pearl Harbor, but of course this was in spring then. I was able to go to Washington D.C. then. This for me was a big thing because we didn't do much travelling at that time. So that year, two people from Holland were selected to go. For me that was a nice kind of a thing then.

EB: What did you do in Washington D.C.?

MVA: Well, actually, we had a parade, and of course we took a train from Detroit. To be honest with you, I can't even remember how I got from Holland to Detroit. I think probably the Triple A took us to Detroit. I can remember being served Vernor's Ginger Ale, which of course was a Detroit product, on our way to Washington D.C. We had a parade and then we saw the Capitol and some other kinds of things. That's about all I can really remember about that particular time.

EB: Now you mentioned in gym class you learned the "Virginia Reel." What's that?

MVA: Well this would be a kind of square dance type of thing. Our gym was probably, I wouldn't dare to say the size, but probably about twenty by thirty. Then you had

steel posts holding up the floors above it so you had a kind of get around things at that time.

EB: Why don't you talk a little bit about your going to school after Longfellow.

MVA: Seventh grade we went to the first high school, which was on Graves Place and Tenth Street. That's where Hope College has their math/physics building now, just behind Central Avenue Christian Reformed Church. That had been done for several years because I guess there were just too many kids for the junior high, which was on River Avenue and the high school, which was on Pine Avenue, between Fifteenth and Sixteenth Street. I think about fifth grade I started playing the clarinet, and my parents gave me private lessons. My brother took piano and I took clarinet. I was pretty diligent with practicing. Then when I got into eighth grade, I was put into the high school band, so I was really in the high school band for quite a long time. Not that I was that great of a clarinet player, but I worked at it a little bit then. Junior high, which would have been eighth and really ninth grade at that time in the building on River Avenue where the administrative offices are located now. I'm just trying to think of a couple of things...I ran for vice-president of the junior high, and odd as it might seem, we had a tie vote. The girl that was tied with me, later became, I can't think of what her title was at West Ottawa, but I think she was in charge of curriculum there. Then I was involved in music there. My eighth grade shop teacher was Gerald Haworth, who later of course formed his own company with the Haworth Company. I can remember I had mumps when I was in the eighth grade, and I was making an easel because my brother did some developing of

pictures and I did some of the same sort of thing later, so I made an easel as my class project. When I got to be sixteen, I started working at Heinz. Heinz paid sixty-five cents an hour, which was quite a bit more what I could make at the grocery store. So I worked there after school, mainly doing clean-up work. The summer, of course, was their busy time, so I worked really all the way through high school and college there, because at that time opportunities for jobs in Holland really were not very many. Actually, until probably the late fifties or so, we really didn't have a lot of industry in Holland where you could get jobs. So I worked for Heinz mainly in the shipping department. As it got into college, then I did mainly, I drove a fork-lift truck. Mr. Schierbeck, who later became the plant manager, employed me on Saturdays more or less just as a kind of a thank you. But then I washed trucks and I took things to the dump, which at that time was on Pine Avenue where Padnos is located now, and they were filling that area during the fifties then, that would have been the late forties, early fifties, right in that period of time.

EB: Where did you go to college?

MVA: I went to Hope College. Well, probably my folks said if you want to go to college, you can stay at home, no problem. You'll have to pay for your own tuition, and I can't even remember, it was less than a hundred dollars a semester at that time, but when you're only getting around a dollar an hour then you still had to pay for it. Like I mentioned, I worked at Heinz. Summertime during the green season we could put in as many hours as we wanted to. For about an eight week period, you could put in seventy hours a week if you wanted to. Monday through Saturday. So



like I mentioned, I mainly worked for the shipping department. One summer I worked and made the syrup that went into the bottles when they canned their pickles. That would have been during the green season. Then at Hope I was involved quite a bit also with music. Dr. Morrette Rider came I think the same year as I did, that would have been in the fall of 1947, and established the orchestra and the band. Before that I don't think instrumental music was too much, and of course Hope really expanded after World War II because of the veterans all coming. The orchestra was a very nice group. I really enjoyed that. At that time we didn't travel like they do today; we had a few concerts maybe in Western Michigan. The orchestra was nice, and also for a couple, maybe an hour a semester or so, I would take a course with just a small group like maybe a clarinet trio or quartet--something of that sort. I was part of the Fraternal Society, the Fraters. I'm a non-athlete, I was not an athlete at all, but they always had the Frater Frolics at that time. So then I played a little bit of saxophone as well as clarinet, so we always had a good time with that.

EB: Did you continue to play the clarinet and the sax?

MVA: Yes, during college we had a dance band, made up of local people. Just in terms of what we're talking about, Bob Albers, who is a local doctor, was involved with that band. Don Hillebrands for awhile was our drummer, and Dick Ruch who later became the head of Herman Miller in Zeeland, also played at that time cornet. They didn't play trumpets as much I don't think at that time. Rog Kramer later became a band director in the eastern side of the state. He played trombone. We

played at the Castle, which at that time accepted guests during the summertime. They would have dances on I think it was Wednesday and Saturday night. I think one or two years we also played at the hotel at Macatawa Park then. So that helped to bring a little money, and we played for some of the sorority and fraternity dances for Hope College. After I graduated, the Korean War was going on, so of course nobody would hire you. I had a teaching certificate. I majored in social studies: a composite major. So I volunteered for the Army, which was a foolish thing to do, because as I found out later, they could have extended my enlistment if they had wanted to rather than volunteering for the draft. But I felt that if I waited, they might not take me until the fall, so there would be nothing to do during that period of time. That would have meant if I had wanted to get into teaching then it would have been a wasted year. So I went into the service in July of 1951. I started basic and they sent me to Camp Chafee, Arkansas. At that time it was a camp. You had sixteen weeks of artillery basic. After that, most people went directly to Korea. As it happened, our company, which was not too great a company, a lot of the people were sent to Alaska. So I had an audition with the band. At the time they had a freeze on anybody going into the band because they wanted people in Korea. They needed people very badly. Then the freeze was lifted, so when I finished my basic training in November, I went right into the band. For the rest of my two years I was stationed in Arkansas, which is not always the nicest place to be, but in comparison to a lot of other things, I thought I was very fortunate. We had a very nice band in terms of people, because a lot of the people

were in the same situation I was, where they graduated from college, not necessarily music majors or anything, but they got into the band. We had a pretty good time. They also had a National Guard Band from New York City. Those guys are more characters, you know; they were really a lot of fun. There were a lot of Italian guys, and Jewish fellows. It was a pretty diverse group. The interesting thing about our band when you think about other groups in the service, nobody ever gambled. I can't tell you why--they played cards, but not for money. When I was in the band, and we had a big band, we did a broadcast a week and we also had four dance band units: two combos and two large, you know, dance bands at that time. We played for the USO in town, the service clubs on our base. By the way at that time, the service clubs were still segregated yet. You had a black service club as well as for whites. Our band was all white. We had no black fellows in our band at all, because we were stationed in Arkansas, and you still had separate facilities there at that time, the early fifties. We also played at the Officer's Club. At the end of the month every fellow would get paid for these special dances, not by who you were, but just as an individual. So in that way, you had some money to spend to go into town, go to restaurants and that type of thing. I think we were getting probably about a hundred or a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month, as far as our pay was concerned.

EB: After the service, did you get a teaching job?

MVA: Yes, what I did, I took a furlough in the spring of 1953 when I was going to be discharged in July. I made some inquiries and there was a job opening in Spring

Lake, which I did not get. Dr. Umbright, who is in charge of the Junior College at Muskegon, also had some job openings. He hired me and I was able to get a job in Muskegon teaching a combination of things. Social studies, which was really a kind of civics course in ninth grade, and then in eighth grade they had a semester business course, mainly out of a workbook. I also taught one hour of American history to seventh graders. It was kind of a combination. We had a very large school there. The junior high occupied the top floor of the building. Our principal was a former football coach, C. Leo Redman, whom a lot of people knew in that area, and if you were a football fan at that time, you would have known him. I stayed in Muskegon for two years. We got married in 1955, and my wife was working with the Holland Chamber of Commerce as a secretary then. There was a job opening, but I had signed a contract already, and I had either a sixty or a ninety day escape clause. At that time, Walter Scott was the superintendent, and he said he would have a job open, but he couldn't give it to me until that time period was ended. So in August I signed a contract with the Holland Public Schools. That was in 1955. Our superintendent in Muskegon, his last name was Beemer, very interesting person. We called him, not to his face, but otherwise we called him Stub Beemer. When he would come into the classroom to evaluate you, he'd stand up with his arms folded, back of the classroom or he'd walk around. He'd never say a word to you, if you'd meet on the stairs he wouldn't say anything either. When I left, he wrote Mr. Scott a letter, saying "Yeah, Mr. Van Ark, his wife is going to be dominating him, because he's moving to Holland." So then I taught seventh

grade at that time, that was before any political annexation took place, so Holland was much smaller than it is now. But all of the people who go to West Ottawa now and some of the people that went to Hamilton would come into Holland, to school, so it was very crowded. Jefferson School was just built then, so they had some of seventh grade at Jefferson School, and some of it was also at Washington School. So I was assigned to Washington School, and we had, if I remember correctly, four rooms there. I taught geography. There was an English teacher, and we didn't have any science at all. In fact, we added science after Sputnik, then they felt they should start science in seventh grade. I taught some science then, which I didn't have any real background for. Then we also had an art teacher and a small area for a gym. So we did have some of that. Jefferson School had a little larger seventh grade population, and then that kept going through 1959. Then the high school was built on Van Raalte Avenue between Twenty-fourth and Twenty-eighth streets. So at that time, I had my choice of staying in a junior high situation or going into elementary. So I decided I'd try elementary. There was an opening at Longfellow, which is only really two blocks away from where we lived. It was kind of interesting because I taught sixth grade for two years, and to come back where I had gone to school. By this time the school of course is getting old, and if the wind would blow the curtains would be flowing in the breeze, and they had hot-water heating with pipes. You know, you had a series of pipes in the room so every time the heat would go on the pipes would bang. By that time, fire regulations had changed, so they couldn't occupy all of the rooms in the building, nothing on the

basement level, or the partial-basement. Only certain rooms could be occupied in the rest of the building. They had added a wing onto Twenty-fourth street. I stayed there ten years until our children started going to that school, and then I transferred to junior high. But while I was there the old school was torn down. That was part of the courtyard. They saved the bell, and some of the people got some of the old bricks from the school. Then I went to junior high, and I taught there for the rest of my time. When the new junior high was built, in around '79 or '80, then the old junior high became the E. E. Fell building, and that was just for seventh grade. We had just all seventh graders there. That lasted for about eight or ten years. The last two years I taught then I moved over to what now would be the West Middle School. At that time, all seventh, eighth, and ninth graders were there. So that was really a very congested building. They put me into a room which was originally an art room, and they made a wall in the middle to separate what was a computer room. I was fortunate--I was on the window side. They put carpet on the floor at least, but I was kind of off by myself in some ways, which wasn't too bad. The kids I had then had to come all the way around to get to my room. Then I retired in 1990.

EB: You said that you have a wife. Why don't you state her name, when you were married and maybe how you met.

MVA: My wife's name is Mae Alice. Her last name was Naber. She grew up really on a farm on what would be Ottagon, which is Thirty-second street in Holland, just east of State Street in Zeeland. She went to the Zeeland schools. My friend's father was

the manager of the Chamber of Commerce, so I would get in there once in awhile. I asked her if she wanted a ride home, and we started dating. We were married in 1955. Starting in the summer of 1958, I was looking for a summer job. Before that I had been a registrar at Camp Geneva for two years. One summer we took a six-week trip. The schools would give a hundred dollars for each of three years. If you took either a six-week trip or if you went to school for the summer. So we decided we'd go out west for six weeks in the summer, and we took the back seat out of our car. We had bought a tent from Holland Awning Company, and we had a Coleman stove. So we spent six weeks..we put on about 12,000 miles in the western states and into Canada then. Then starting in 1958, Arthur Deem was looking for somebody to be the manager of Oxbow which is the Summer School of Painting in Saugatuck. At that time, it was a for-profit corporation because they had organized in the early 1900s when for-profit corporations were not a problem. But by that time, they were having real problems. They had a lot of changes, and they wanted to get back more to fine arts rather than to crafts, so there was a lot of problems within their own board. I did everything there, from registration to hiring the cook, making any kind of repairs that would not require money. We stayed there. We had a room in the inn which was Riverside Hotel on the old channel of the Kalamazoo River, which was plugged up when they changed the course of the river in 1905, and then that became kind of a dead end. That's why it was called Oxbow because of the shape of the river right at that point. It was a very interesting experience. I probably would lose about fifteen or twenty pounds in a summer

through work and just worry that we were going to make it, as far as financial things were concerned. Now, of course, they're a non-profit corporation so they can get money and their tied more closely to the Art Institute of Chicago. My wife started taking some classes even though she was working full-time. She really enjoyed art. So as time progressed, we had children starting in the 1960's, so she really didn't do too much until later. She was not working at that time when you had children, then she started working part-time in Vocational Education. She took some courses at Hope College from the art department with Del Michel and others. She started doing more art work. Now she does a lot of watercolors. She has her work at the Castle Park Gallery. She just had a show. She's done some monotypes this summer with Michigan leaves, and mostly things from our yard here, from our garden. She also, for the last about eight years, has had a class for developmentally disabled adults at the Holland Area Arts Center. That's been a kind of a, well, both sides, good and bad. When I say bad, you know it's very trying sometimes, but she's gotten a lot of good, steady volunteers. That's really been helpful. They have about between twenty and twenty-five students in that class, and they meet the year around on Monday nights. The last several years now, Hope College students who are majoring primarily in psychology, they will go there for one of their related experiences for one hour credit for the semester. She is quite involved I would say with the Art Center.

EB: You mentioned you had kids. Why don't you tell me their names and when they were born.



MVA: Our son Jonathan was born [date removed], 1961--Pearl Harbor Day. We adopted him and got him the same day, I was trying to think now, I think it would be Senator Glenn now, made his space shot, it would have been in February of 1962. I should mention two years later, our daughter was born. Her name is Elizabeth. We always called her Beth. Both of our kids went through Holland Public Schools. When they got to college, we said they could go wherever they wanted to. We would pay tuition, etc. They would have to take care of their own board. We felt that they should get away from home, but they both decided on Hope. Our son majored in computer science, and he had a couple of local jobs. The one company went bankrupt and the other company was purchased by another company. So he went to North Carolina through the help of his prof at Hope College, who had some connections there. He worked under contract with GTE and the defense division there. They were doing programs for the Army. Then he got a permanent job, by that time he was married and had one child. So they were here for six months while he was there, then they moved there permanently. Now he's working for a new company, made up mainly of former employees of GTE. They like it very much there. We usually try to visit spring and fall. I don't care to go there in the summer, it's too hot. Our daughter majored in psychology. She did not go on for her master's right away. She did some other things. Then she went to the University of Michigan and got her master's degree in school social work. She was in two schools where she was the first school social worker, and now she's at Harper Creek, which is just east and south of Battle Creek. She likes it there quite

well. Those are our two kids.

EB: Why don't you tell me a little bit about hobbies that you have.

MVA: Music has always been a real important thing I would say. As I mentioned earlier, I played the clarinet. When I was a senior in college, I probably gave about twenty-five lessons a week. That helped, you know, to pay for college. Then I was able to really save some money so when I finished college, I didn't have any debts. When I came back from the service, I could at least buy a car. I couldn't do much else. Then after we got married, well, I've always been a member of the Trinity Reformed Church. That was down on Twentieth and Central. We were very active there, and in 1984 they moved to their present site on Apple Avenue between Twenty-fourth and Thirty-second. We were involved with the choir there. I really enjoyed singing, baritone-bass primarily. My wife also sang. We were involved in other things there as well. I like to primarily listen to classical and jazz music. I try to record everything for woodwinds, so I enjoy that. Also, I started back in about the late '70s collecting postcards. My mother was a real writer and saved the postcards she had received. When she grew up in 1910s, or around 1910, postcards were the primary way of communicating with people. You'd send a postcard for everything. She had around four books of postcards. She died, and my father later re-married, and then when he died, my stepmother said to my brother and I if we wanted the cards we could have them. So we just split them. You know, one for me and one for him, et cetera. I started getting interested in postcards, find them like the flea market towards Saugatuck and the woman there usually had a lot of

cards. You go to postcard shows where dealers would sell cards. Kalamazoo, Chicago, wherever we would go you could find them. I knew where postcard shows would be. If we'd be on vacation then I'd find those. So I really started collecting those in earnest during the '80s and probably the early '90s. At that time, postcards were quite inexpensive. I tried to collect Ottawa and Allegan county, but then I found that that became a little too much. I had quite a collection of South Haven, and I sold that. Now I still have cards probably about from Glenn, which is south of Saugatuck, and I have quite a large collection of Allegan cards, Saugatuck-Douglas, maybe probably around nine hundred or a thousand cards, and about the same number of Grand Haven. Holland-Zeeland, I couldn't even tell you. I've got quite a few like of Tulip Time, and then I've got a lot of cards just of the Holland-Macatawa-Zeeland-Hamilton area. So I have about five or six hundred of those on slides. It's kind of interesting. In the early days, of course, postcards were purchased by people when they took vacations; or like Holland was a place where a lot of people got off the train to go either to Muskegon or to transfer some other place, so they would just send a postcard. In those days also, the early days I'm talking about, people would take their own personal pictures and put them on postcards. So I have postcards of my mother, and my mother and father, and my uncle. Those were very, very nice. So through the postcard collection, I've become quite interested in Holland history. You see a lot of the changes that have taken place. You see the cycles that occur over a period of time, how the community has really changed--as far as buildings I'm talking about, not people, because, except for

private cards, you don't have as many pictures of people usually with postcards. Out of the local industries, thirty, fifty years and then they are gone and someone else takes their place. The early resorts along Lake Michigan or Macatawa have changed. Transportation, of course, with the interurban that came through from the last part of the 1800s until the latter part of the 1920s. There's been quite a few changes that have occurred.

EB: Why don't you tell a little bit about what you remember about the freeway coming through Holland?

MVA: You're talking about U.S. 31? Part of that time I was in the service when it was just being built north of Holland, U.S. 31 instead of the two-lane road. Originally, of course, U.S. 31 came in on 64th Street which is what we call the Old Saugatuck Road. We used to be able to see the shield of the federal highway on the bridge abutments. They didn't have a separate sign. In the 30s, they built the Blue Star Highway, which connected Holland to areas south. It came right through the city. The freeway was built in the early '60s, but U.S. 31 itself, the bypass around Holland, was built in the late '40s early '50s. I can remember the Holland Rendering Works, which processed waste materials of animals, like bones and all the rest, grind them up into bone meal, fertilizer or made into fat. They were located right between DeNooyer's and R. E. Barber right on Eighth street where the highway goes now. Because of the odors that would come from that plant, they had limited places where they could go. So the state condemned that land and eventually they moved to the New Richmond area which was south of Holland. Then the state

built, what I call the bypass, but you know it's really the highway today. When I taught in Muskegon, where M-21, Chicago Drive and U.S. 31 met, there was no overpass there. So then there was a stop light there. I can remember accidents. People would come over the hill and suddenly there would be a stop light. If the weather was bad, especially, there was a problem. But if I travelled between Muskegon and Holland when I taught there those two years, then it was a little easier because it was a divided highway at that time, even though it was not limited access. The freeway was built into Holland in the '60s. I taught Driver's Education then for about twenty-six years for the schools in the summer--that was kind of a summer job then. I usually taught two sessions and then we'd take the third session and we'd usually, we had a camping trailer...(end of side one)

EB: You were talking about the freeway to Grand Rapids...

MVA: Yes, that was not completed until later. I can't tell you what year, but probably in the '70s before that was completed in Holland, and then when 196 tied into Grand Rapids. Before that you had M-21, around Zeeland, originally went through Zeeland, then was a four lane road once you got past Zeeland, which was quite a road in that day. But today, nothing. Roads really have changed quite a bit in that period of time. I can remember when I was real young, we used to go to Jamestown which was east of Zeeland. We'd come back at night and sometimes the Byron Road, which is the present road out of Zeeland, when you get through the old muck area there up the hill, I can remember sometimes it would be very hard because there would be new snow, and they wouldn't take care of it like today. So

to get up the hill would be a problem then.

EB: How did those road expansions and growth help Holland industry?

MVA: I think the main thing...I mentioned of course annexation and enlargement of the city occurred in the late '50s or early '60s. At that time, the Holland Public Schools said, "If you're going to stay with us, we have to build a new high school." So it became a city/school thing, a political type of annexation. West Ottawa decided to start building their own system. Also Hamilton built a junior and senior high school. As a result of that, Holland annexed the area we call Maplewood, which would be toward the south of Thirty-second street and then they annexed Montello Park and Lakeview to the west, and Apple Avenue which had the General Electric plant at that time to the east. The rest of the areas did not come in, and so for a few years it was kind of an odd thing. Then Holland started HEDCOR and that started to bring in more industry. So as a result of that really, more industry came, and we had a lot of different types of industries that came as compared to, like I mentioned back in the '50s, if you had any real job skills, it was very hard to find a job in Holland. You really almost had to leave, you know, for the majority of people, whereas today, there are a lot of different types of jobs that are available. On the one hand you had growth, which makes a lot of changes, changed the whole complexion of thing, but on the other hand, it provided a lot of jobs. So, to go back to your original question, we had railroad transportation here for some industries. And then roads tied in for the other things as well.

EB: You haven't talked much about the relationship between Holland and the church,

especially the RCA, and the Christian Reformed Church.

MVA: I always went to Trinity Reformed Church, and I was just a block away from the Christian high school. When I went to Longfellow, and later when I taught there, I would say a lot of the teachers there were actually from our own church. In those days, well, when I went back to teach, it was expected that you'd have some type of Bible reading in the morning. I usually let the kids take care of that. At that time, you didn't think too much about that. I really was not involved too much with the differences between the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church. We went to the Reformed Church, so I would say, a lot of the kids I knew and the people we did things with at that time, the church was kind of the center of social activities really, too. Trinity Reformed Church was a neighborhood church. When it was started, it was on the outskirts of the city back in the 1910s, and then kind of grew with the neighborhood. So I really did not get involved with the differences between the two, actually. Later I began to see some of the contrasts between the two. For some people, parochial education is a very essential thing. I still feel myself that as a Christian, you should be in the world enough so that people can be seeing you rather than being separated. On the other hand, I went to Hope College, which is affiliated with the Reformed Church. So that was really like going to a church-related school rather than to a public college or university. At that time though I would have either gone to Western Michigan in Kalamazoo, which at that time didn't have as high of standards as Hope College or to Michigan State College, or some other place.

EB: Speaking of Hope College, how does Hope College play a role in the community of Holland?

MVA: Well, I feel myself, a couple of things. When our church was thinking about staying on Twentieth-street or moving, I was quite involved with that process, and my wife also. We had meetings with Hope College, and they were quite interested and concerned that we would stay there to sort of stabilize that neighborhood. At that time, they said they were only going to be expanding up to a certain point. Since that time they have purchased a lot of property to the east and also to the south, much more than what they said at that time. But I think, really, if you want to take advantage of what the college has a lot of things really to offer. We go to some of the concerts, obviously not all of them. We have tickets for the Grand Rapids Symphony, that's part of what we do, but we always get to the Vespers, and some of the Sunday concerts, and then some of the others. We go with my brother to the basketball games. I usually don't go to the football games any more. I did at first, when we were married. Also I belong to HASP, which is the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals. The college has been really supportive of that group. It's kind of a mutual thing, because we do some things which help the college, but on the other hand, they also help us and encourage us. I don't know if you're acquainted with HASP or not, but they run their own classes and it's very nice because you can stay as busy with them as you wish, and they offer quite a wide variety of things. Right now I just finished...we were gone to Virginia, North Carolina in October, so I missed one class with the Internet. And then I'm taking



the series on the Civil War right now. In December, I'll be volunteering and helping with the Salvation Army baskets for several different days. So Hope College is a pretty positive thing, I realize having gone there. But for me it was an opportunity of course for advanced education too.

EB: Let's talk about your heritage, your ethnic background. Why don't you say a little bit about that?

MVA: I mentioned earlier that my father was born in the Netherlands, and his father wanted to come to the United States. I have no idea what the economic conditions were at that time. He was a blacksmith like I mentioned earlier, and I also mentioned that his wife died just before they came, but they still did come, and they had relatives here, which helped. Those relatives had come to Holland very early. I can't tell you exactly...we were related to them...but my father learned to speak English. I don't think you could tell too much that he had been born in the Netherlands because he was about eight years old when they came. So he learned English very fast. I would say the older sister and brother, you could tell more. Primarily the younger four people in the family you couldn't tell very much that they had been born in the Netherlands. They were involved with...in terms of ethnic background, church for us was a very important thing, and they were involved with the Reformed Church, both my mother's family and my father's family. We never learned Dutch at home. They spoke Dutch, you know the old story, if they wanted to say something that they didn't want us to understand. My wife's father spoke more Dutch at home, and also she went to some Dutch services.

The interesting part, when we visited the Netherlands a few years ago for three weeks, my wife remembered more things and of the Dutch language than I really, the few words that I knew were not very many. But I think that my parents, even though with a limited background, felt that education though was very important. They tried to give my brother and me the opportunity to stay at home if we wanted to go to Hope College at that time.

EB: The role of women in Holland, how has that changed? From your parents' generation, to now.

MVA: When I taught, junior high and senior high, probably, well, this would have been after World War II, had really quite a few fellows that were teaching. When I started teaching at Longfellow, I was the first male that taught there. So I won't say too much about that, it was for me, sometimes a little more difficult because just being a male there. Not that I was put under any particular kind of a pressure, but I think kids liked it, and at that time, I wasn't that old and I could do a lot of things with the kids as far as playing games, or if we had gym we could do a lot of things together. When I think about my mother, she was always at home, and never worked outside the home. She always did her thing there. With my wife, once our kids were in junior high, she got a part-time job working at Vocational Education and teaching at Community Education. She's been involved a lot more outside of the home. That's in terms of our family. We have a neighbor, I won't mention her name, but I would say that if she were born today, that probably she would be...she is a leader in the community, but she probably would have been more involved

probably outside, although because of occupations, probably she would not had to have been. But she was very involved with a lot of the community things. So you know, today you see quite a contrast. When we grew up, talking about after we got married, I think I started teaching my first year for \$3000, but then because I had been in the service, they gave me \$200 extra. So my wife, as a secretary, was making almost, not quite as much as I was, teaching. So we didn't have too much to start with, but we always managed to get along. As time went on then we tried to save, so that really benefitted us later, especially now since we've been retired because, I'm getting away from your original question, but we've had an opportunity to do a lot of travel since I've been retired. To partially answer your question, my wife has one niece who has been in China teaching for I think seven years, or this is her eighth year now. She went over teaching in the People's University with Cedarville College which is a very conservative Baptist school. She went there as a part of that team, teaching English. So it was kind of an ironic thing, because here you had a very secular type of situation and then you have all of these Christians. We visited her about three or four years ago. We took a trip to China and then we spent an extra week with her then. She did some things to show us around Beijing. Last spring we took a trip to Bolivia and Peru. I don't know if you've ever heard of the Inca Trail or not, that leads into Macchu Picchu, but we hiked that. We were a little too old for that, we were very fortunate through the grace of God that we made it, because you know it's a four day trek. I think that the total trip, was the most beautiful trip I think that we had taken all together. We

have actually been to the Netherlands, we took a boat trip between St. Petersburg and Moscow and China, and we have taken a number of Elderhostels. Everything from an impressionist painters barge trip in France and Oaxaca, Mexico. We took a naturalist trip to Costa Rica. So we've had an opportunity to do some travelling since we've been retired. We don't usually go away during the winter per se, because Mae is busy with her art work, and I have enough to do. I volunteer also at the Holland Museum, usually a half-day a week. Then also in the last three or four years, I've volunteered a couple hours a week to help the sixth grade band teacher with clarinet or saxophone. You find enough to do, and at home here I enjoy working in the yard and garden. I have a greenhouse, and I collect cacti and succulents. If you're a biology major you know about those things, so I built a greenhouse back in 1970. I slowly evolved into collecting cacti and succulents, rather than some of the other things I had earlier.

EB: That's interesting. You're very lucky that you guys get to travel so many places.

MVA: Yes, and as growing up, I think we went once to Niagara Falls, and once to the Straits of Mackinaw. But beyond that, we didn't have the opportunity. So like I mentioned, after we got married, then we took that six-week trip. Then for about five summers, I was working at Oxbow, so we didn't do much travelling then. But later we started doing some with camping. After we retired then we did quite a bit more for about four years. Then we had a motor home, and we took that to the Maritime Provinces of Canada. We had a five week trip to Alaska with that, and out west and other places. So that was nice too.

EB: How have the everyday fears changed from when you were a kid to when your kids were younger?

MVA: Especially what are you thinking about?

EB: Well, nowadays, it's not uncommon to hear about burglaries, muggings. How have those type of fears changed?

MVA: I would say that our house, we had a skeleton key-- no special locks at all. A lot of times we wouldn't even have anything locked up at all. Of course we didn't have that much either, I don't think. I can remember some problems once in awhile in Holland, but it would be a major thing if you would have somebody being killed or something of that sort. You have to kind of adjust to the changes. We don't like to feel like we're ever threatened by those kinds of things. We try to take precautions that we can, in terms of how we live. If we travel, we try to know ahead of time what's going to be happening; we try to be aware of things. But I think it is too bad when you can't trust other people. I think this is kind of sad. In our own neighborhood we've had a door forced once, nobody came in, but we assume that somebody tried to, and they could have. We've had our doors replaced, but otherwise we have never been burglarized, but our neighbors, a few of them have had problems with that. It's not a nice experience really.

EB: So you'd say that those fears have changed from when you were a child?

MVA: I don't know if I have fears, but on the other hand, I take more precautions than I would have done earlier. If I drive at night, I try to make sure to lock the doors of the car. We have a security light in the back of our house. I don't know if we

really need it or not, but we do. So you know, we have a few of those kind of things.

EB: Do you notice a large generation gap in Holland?

MVA: Yes, I think one of our problems with our son living in North Carolina, we have one grandson who's ten years old. So we see him, just occasionally. We don't have a lot of kids that we're directly involved with all of the time. However, volunteering at the schools and talking to people, to me it's not easy today with kids. I'm talking about raising kids and just life as a family is a lot more difficult today because of the problems that they face. This is kind of a problem.

EB: Holland has been recognized as one of the top ten all-American cities. Why don't you tell me why you think Holland has been recognized.

MVA: All-American city, why should it be? Having lived here all of my life, I guess I'm sort of prejudiced in terms of what we're trying to do here. I feel that Holland, as far as I see things, and I realize I am an older person and a lot of the problems deal with people that I don't really have a lot of connections with, but it seems like the city and this surrounding area through the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council try to work at problems that come up, rather than trying to say they don't exist or avoid them somewhat. I think like the Weed and Seed programs that have been carried on here in the city and also in the West Ottawa areas are examples of that. I think our schools are making an effort. Van Raalte school, which has a lot of different groups, is not just a school, but it is a center for the community in that area. It provides a lot of services, a lot of things go on at school, which provide help for

people and encouragement. Talking to people that have come from other cities and settled here, they feel that Holland provides a lot of things for them that enrich their lives. In other places you might have to belong to a private group to take advantage of these things. We have Evergreen Common for senior citizens. I don't belong to it. Right now I am plenty busy and so is my wife, but I know we should really join just to support it. I think there are a lot of volunteers also that help in a number of different ways within our community. I think that we're still of a size yet where volunteers can make a difference. I think that with the background of this particular area, people still really do make a difference yet.

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

MVA: In what way do you mean?

EB: Anyway you can think of, whether it had to do with the city of Holland, whether it had to do with a person, or a place.

MVA: A significant turning point. Wow, that's hard. I don't know if there is any one thing. Like I mentioned earlier, I think in elementary school, I had the opportunity to get involved with music, and also was involved with the Safety Patrol which was a leadership thing. I'm a person who probably doesn't push myself maybe as hard as I could as far as promoting. I like to do things more probably behind scenes rather than be up front. In college, at Hope College, I would say several people there really encouraged me. For one thing, in high school, I should have taken Advanced English and no one ever told me to. So when I was a sophomore, and ran into especially Greek Mythology, et cetera, I had a real tough time. Dr. Jimmy

Prins, my teacher, I would say encouraged me. When I started getting involved in a major in social studies, Professor Al Vandebusch who taught specially government and political science was very encouraging. Then Ella Hawkinson, who came here and worked very hard to get the social studies department going, also gave me a lot of encouragement. I think through our lives also, religious faith has played a very important part. I know back in the '80s, when we faced some rather serious problems, this was very helpful, and I think along with it that time, just music helped me at least get through some of the kinds of things that were really very serious problems at that time.

EB: Why don't you tell me about somebody important here in Holland that affected your life.

MVA: I'd have to think about that. I haven't really thought about who that might be. I think as I mentioned a minute ago, teachers, not just elementary, but also junior and senior high, were very helpful. That was very important to me. As far as a person that would stand out in the community right now, offhand, I really couldn't think of a particular person.

EB: Okay, that's perfectly fine. How have your priorities changed as your life has progressed here in Holland?

MVA: When Mae and I were first married, our incomes were very limited. As I mentioned, coming out of the Depression of course you look at things in a particular kind of a way. So we worked hard just to try to establish ourselves, and I had some part-time jobs which helped. Mae worked until our children came. So we started



building our home the third year after we were married. We lived in an apartment for the first two years. I would say the first year is probably just trying to get ourselves established. But during that time also, we were both quite involved with Trinity Reformed Church in a number of different ways: choir, youth groups, consistory, those types of things. I think as time goes on, probably you appreciate more things, and I shouldn't use the term things but people. I think also we've had more opportunities to be involved with things that enrich our lives. Mae does a lot of watercolor and other types of art. So whenever we take a trip, we try to go to art museums. If there are special shows in Chicago or other places, we try to see those. Even in trips we've taken to foreign countries, we've done that. We've enjoyed the Grand Rapids Symphony concerts over the years. We go with friends, and we've done that for quite a few years. So I think in that way we've probably broadened how we look at a number of different kinds of things. Hopefully our lives then would have been enriched that way then too.

EB: How has your commitment to faith changed over the years?

MVA: Well, in our home, our family faith was a very important thing. It was emphasized about six months ago. We have a new calling pastor in our church. He said, "You know, the thing I remember about you," back in those days we'd have a city-wide thing for Bible-knowledge or something of that sort, and he said, "You won the city championship in that." I had forgotten about that completely. So at that time it was at one level, but then I think through life and especially if you hit real serious problems, I think is when if you do have religious faith, it helps, and I think it

strengthens your faith then at that time, even though the problems themselves can hit you very hard. Through much of our life really, things went fairly smoothly. You know, we ran into a few things where we had some really very serious problems that we had to overcome. I think faith played a big part in that. I think one of the things that we are facing, and I think it's true for a lot of people our age, was the change in the way church services are run now as far as music, and some of the other kinds of things. You lose, as far as we're concerned, some of the quality. I think it becomes more of a popular type of thing, when I say that I'm talking about certain aspects of the service, rather than quality. I enjoy a lot of different types of music and so my main concern is, when I get involved in music, especially either listening or when I used to do more singing et cetera, would be the quality of the music no matter what kind it really was. So I think, for us, this has been kind of a difficult thing. But on the other hand, you realize changes take place. You don't want to set yourself as a person who is an obstructionist, but yet when you have certain values, you hate to see some of those kinds of things changing.

EB: Do you think that change in the style of church is due to younger pastors?

MVA: I think to an certain extent. How you attract people of course, I realize is very essential for any religious group. There are a number of different ways to do this, but I think that for at least ourselves, I'm talking about Mae and me, I think it's been a little more difficult, at least some of the aspects, when you get real changes where you lose, what I call the quality, rather than just playing to the crowd. The changes that occur with that.

EB: How has your involvement in the community changed?

MVA: Well, when I was teaching, I would say that a lot of my energy was just involved in teaching. Well, when you get through of a day of teaching, you still have papers to correct and you have to think about preparation. So besides church and a few other activities, that pretty well took care of my time and energy. Since I've been retired now, that and I volunteer at the Holland Museum--usually I try to do that about a half-a-day a week. I've enjoyed that, because I do enjoy Holland history. Also like I mentioned earlier, I have helped the sixth grade band teacher with clarinets and saxophones. I realize again I can only do so much with that particular kind of activity. The Hope Academy of Senior Professionals provides as many outlets as you really want in the way of activities and classes. So with that and many opportunities to travel and to do some things, we've been very fortunate since I've retired.

EB: There are just a few other things that you may want to touch on. You talked about your life here in Holland, after and during the Depression. What about during the Korean or Vietnam wars? Was there a significant change here?

MVA: I don't know if I mentioned earlier or not, I graduated from Hope in 1951. That was during the Korean War. So I had a teaching certificate, and unless you had political connections, school districts really didn't care to hire you because they didn't know when you might be drafted. So I actually enlisted for two years, and then I served my two years and fortunately like I mentioned, I was attached to the band during that time. But a lot of the people that came through our camp, and I

saw a number of people from Holland that went through, went right to Korea, and was not a very pleasant kind of experience during that time. I think that the Vietnam War, to me, was really a critical mistake in our country, from both the economic standpoint and also from the way it changed how people lived. It was really a kind of a sad thing that happened to our country because I think that the way people dealt with their lives changed so much, not necessarily just because of the war, but because of the conflict between the different groups, and especially once people began to see the fallacy of what we were trying to do in Vietnam. To me, without any popular support of the country, you can't fight a war. You can kid yourself, but I think that was sad. I think with the fighting in Vietnam and the whole drug scene there with our troops really led to a lot of problems for a lot of veterans when they came back. I think when you look at veterans from the Gulf War, Vietnam--Vietnam was a very long war, in some respects for some people, and of course the fighting was quite different. I'm quite amazed that people who came through World War II, who might have been fighting very actively for four years in some cases, really survived very well as compared to those who fought in some of the later conflicts actually.

EB: Do you have anything to say about Tulip Time? Maybe how it has changed?

MVA: I've been involved with it, not all of the time I've lived in Holland. When I taught, I really didn't get involved very much, oh, I shouldn't say that. When I taught elementary, I did. When I taught junior high, I really didn't get involved with it. When I was younger, going to school, at first just being a participant, either with a

costume or decorating bicycles--that type of thing. Being part of the parade was something. For the rest of the time through school I was in the band all of the time. Also when I was in college, then I was in the American Legion Band. I marched with them during that time. More recently now, the last three or four years, I've forgotten how many, with HASP we've been providing volunteers to go on the trolley tours, kind of a historical kind of tour. I've been doing that since they've started it. Tulip Time I think is a good thing, whether two weeks works out, I think it's a little long for a lot of people. I think when you have volunteers you have to consider how much that they can really handle. However in talking, especially groups that come in, a lot of the senior groups that come in the first week of Tulip Time, before the parades et cetera, are really just very happy to come here and see tulips, and maybe Dutch dancers, that type of thing. The second week, that is different then when you have parades and Dutch dancers, and all of the rest. Tulip Time I think still plays an important part in the community, however with the economic development of our city over the last twenty or more, maybe a little less than thirty, I don't feel that Tulip Time is as essential as it used to be. Resorts, per se, are not as important as they used to be because, well, along Lake Macatawa and Lake Michigan, a lot of that has become permanent housing now, whereas they used to be more just of a summer type of resort. So in those days, Tulip Time provided kind of an economic incentive in May, before actually the tourist season began. But now I realize tourism is still a big thing. I think with our other avenues of economic development, Tulip Time isn't quite as important as it used to be.

Holland Furnace used to make a big production by bringing in movie stars at the Warm Friend Hotel, promoting their products as well as Tulip Time.

EB: I guess the last thing I have for you to comment on is, what do you think about the bilingualism in the school?

MVA: I have kind of mixed feelings about bilingual education. On the one hand, we have probably more different groups, I couldn't even tell you how many. If I said twenty-five or thirty, I'm talking about ethnic groups that have foreign languages that have come in now. It's a rough thing and I think it's very essential that we get people past the point where they can only speak native language, that they are able to communicate in English, because I think that's what eventually what most people want to do if they're given the opportunity. I think I volunteered one year at Community Education to help a Vietnamese person start learning some English. I'm not really a reading teacher per se...

(end of side B, tape 1)

MVA: I think community education really, you see the heart, when I say the heart of the community, the people who have really come in and really have to work very hard to be able to accomplish anything, especially because they cannot speak English or very little English. You'd be amazed at the number of people. And then when you get into the schools themselves, I've been away of course, this is my eighth year, so I really don't know completely what is happening in terms of bilingual education, but I think you do have to help people along to be able to make the transition between one language and another. I feel that one of the problems we always face

anytime is when you promote programs. You have to be careful of course, the program, the end results justify what you are doing, instead of setting up empires for people who have a particular agenda that they want to accomplish rather than to deal with the problem itself.

EB: Is there anything else that you might want to add that would help somebody fifty years from now?

MVA: Fifty years from now, wow. Well, I would just say that I think in looking back through my time, I've been able to experience a lot of things that have occurred. I don't think there's any way that you can duplicate that kind of experience. Going back to the 1930s and the '40s and the '50s, et cetera, you've seen all kinds of changes that have occurred, and you've maybe grown up with them, changed with them, and I think you have to keep doing this through your whole life. I'm not very computer literate right now. We have a computer, my wife does a lot more with it than I do, but I took a course on the Internet. One of the comments that the person in charge said was, "It's not how much information you have, but rather how your life is involved with that, and what kind of a person you really are, not how much information you have." So I feel that I have been very fortunate to have gone through a lot of these changes. At certain times, survive some of the changes that have occurred. Starting out very simply, I've had opportunities and fortunately I've been able to use those. Since we've been retired, we have enough resources so that we really can do some things, which when we first were married, we didn't feel we probably could ever have done. What the future will bring, you don't know. But

on the other hand, I feel that we've been very blessed in terms of what has happened to us through our lives. No matter what happens in the future, I would still feel that our life here has been a good life.

EB: Do you have anything else?

MVA: Well I think that's about all I can say right now. My brother and his wife were over for Thanksgiving, and I mentioned that we were talking a little bit about some of these times. He's nine years older than I am, so he saw things maybe a little differently from what I did at those times. So it was kind of interesting to compare, in talking with him, how he saw some things as compared to maybe the way I did. You know, with what I just mentioned, I feel that we had a lot of opportunities in our lives that have been enriching for us.

EB: Just wanted to make sure we got everything.

MVA: Yes.

EB: Thank you.

MVA: Okay, thank you.