

Interview with Raymond Schaap

Interviewed by Anna Holt

1999

AH: This is Friday July 9, an interview between Anna Holt and Ray Schaap. First of all I would just like a little of your personal history, when you were born, where you grew up.

RS: I was born February 19, 1911 in the Netherlands, in the province of Vriesland. I came to the United States as an immigrant, like so many other people did with my parents, in 1925. I was fourteen years old. We ended up in Zeeland here. We were sponsored by relatives of course, as all people have to be sponsored by somebody in order to get here. I did not go to high school because you didn't have to in those days. In 1926, I started to work at Herman Miller when I was fifteen because there was no child labor laws in those days as there are today. I worked in the machine department, did many other roust about jobs throughout the plant. I had also learned some English at the same time. That didn't go so bad because they all knew I was a Dutch boy. Slowly on I worked myself up into other departments. I lived in Zeeland with my folks. I attended night classes at Holland Business College, there is no such thing today anymore, but there was in those days above the Woolworth Stores, Eighth Street in Holland, where I attended night classes two nights a week taking English, writing, a couple of general courses a person of my type should have. That's where I met my wife, she was also going, she was a girl from Holland. We were married in

1931, we're still married today. We hope to celebrate our sixty-eighth wedding anniversary.

[stop]

RS: As I said, I started to work there at Herman Miller in 1926, I never expected of course that I would be there a lifetime. As I worked from one department to another, they were originally on Washington Street in Zeeland until they built a new plant I think it was 1948, or '50's somewhere, I don't know they exact year. I worked myself up throughout the various departments, from one department to another. I worked in the upholstering department quite a few years until I ended up in the shipping department where I was in charge of shipping. Herman Miller was getting busier and busier and bigger and bigger. I was one of the people that helped originate the trucklines that Herman Miller runs across the country now, blanket wrapped furniture. That went all over the United States. I was able to hire the first driver, the second driver and so on. In the later years, prior to retirement I worked more or less in production control, about three or four years before I retired in 1973. I then worked part-time for Herman Miller as a bus driver. Herman Miller put some buses on the road to get people from Kent County Airport to the plant here, visitor, buyers and such. I would get them and bring them. That was only a part-time job until '76 when I fully retired from Herman Miller after fifty years, forty-seven full-time and three years part-time. Herman Miller grew from a small company to what it is now today, in fact they're still bigger now than when I retired. I do not have very close contact with Herman Miller at the present time during my retirement, the annual picnic and

the Retiree Club. Three times a year we get a newspaper. A man by the name of Howard Johnson writes that paper, edits it, news of the retirees and so forth. My contact with Herman Miller is not that good at the present time...it's not what it ought to be maybe. My kids have grown, they're all in business and my wife and I we live on the west end of town here. We're enjoying it although we are right along in age. It's not easy, but we're still living in our own home and that's something to be blessed for that. During all of those years at Herman Miller I've seen the company grow. I've met a number of their designers, like George Nelson, Gilbert Rhode, people that designed Herman Miller stuff. I've seen it grow and it was amazing at times. Of course I am very familiar with the DePree people, who owned and operated the plant, especially Mr. D.J. DePree, who happened to be the general manager all those years and then came Hugh and then came Max DePree, you've heard those names mentioned many times. In fact, we've got a meeting coming up with them some time in August. Hugh is coming in from Florida and Max lives in Holland, D.J. is passed away. They would like to meet some of the old-timers, big banquet room at Herman Miller plant, we're going to have a session over there. I should have taken that paper along to show you.

AH: Back when you started was Herman Miller still only doing residential furniture?

RS: Oh yes, residential. They were not in the office furniture or commercial very much at all. It was strictly bedroom furniture.

AH: When did that happen?

RS: In the '40's they began to come in touch with Gilbert Rhode, a designer, you maybe

have seen his name before. They start getting into some desks, that was the beginning of office furniture. Later on George Nelson came into the picture and the office furniture widened out such as comprehensive storage units and walls and the offices as you see them today. I'm sure there's some at the place where you work. That of course needed revision every year almost by the designers because competition was very keen. That's how places keep going, little bit of changes here and there, something a little nicer, handier, easier. I don't know much about design, but I see it develop over the years. Then of course the chairs that go with it, conference room tables, business people's chairs, all kinds, you've seen them.

[stop]

AH: So in the '40's you were making mostly office furniture or were you making residential and office?

RS: Both pretty well. They still kept the line of home furniture too. Slowly on that was phased out. It became strictly office furniture, one hundred percent. They made the few occasional tables here and there used in offices, things that added to offices, chairs and of course the famous Eames lounge chair. You've probably seen one of those. Things of that nature, addition to, that's got something to do in office too. Eames lounge chair, they've got them in the waiting rooms and so forth. That's what it amounted to in those days. Each year, or every two years, something new comes up. You watch the competition and they come up with something but then you try to improve on that or make it a little bit nicer looking. Woods and fabrics have an awful lot to do with it. You know these fabric walls, you've seen them in Herman Miller

set-ups. There's always changes to be made. How those designers and architect figure all that out is beyond me. [laughter] You just work in the plant and manufacture as to what the builders and the architects say, "Hey this is it." You have to have new machinery from time to time in order to make that stuff that they design. You have to have people that are in the know, but then that's what the supervisors are for, they're trained. They're kept in touch. The average worker just does the job.

AH: Put the stuff in front of him...

RS: ..Yes. It's more or less like that. And then there's always foreman, keep things going, know what has to be done, give it to the proper work people. One can probably do it better. For instance, everybody couldn't work on those famous Eames lounge chairs, just a certain group of people that was assigned for that particular job. That's the way it goes with other parts of furniture, each his own. It was a great company to work for. I always admired D.J. DePree, he's a fine gentleman. He believed in being in touch with the worker. So were Max and Hugh although they were just a little bit more...educated, or more read up on today's systems while D.J. was more of the old school. New things and new ideas and new this and that, it came along as Hugh and Max came into charge of the company. That's they way it will go in all companies because of things that are being made and developed throughout the world you might say. Newer people, younger people, pick that up in order to keep going. It was pretty much of a family affair, the DePree family, nice people, wonderful people to work for. If you had a good job there, take care of it and you were all set.

AH: When did the Scanlon plan come in?

RS: Well, sometime in the '40's there was a man by the name of Carl Frost. He got in touch with D.J. DePree in connection with somewhat of a bonus plan I'll call it. It was called the Scanlon plan because a person by the name of Scanlon started it, originated it, whatever. It was being picked up by different companies around the countries as being a good profit sharing plan, where by you would be able to participate in somewhat bonuses, they call them, profits in other words, amongst the people that are making stuff for you, the workforce. It was hard to get that thing going when you never participated in something like that. You and I would get just so much an hour and that was it. Now you become a company partner somewhat. You might have to change a few of your ways as to doing things, better, faster, to make this thing go. A company would set aside a certain bit of their profits for participation plan, amongst all the workers in the entire plant, from the top to the bottom because they all have contributed in some way to produce that item. It had a slow start, but it took hold and developed into a real good thing for the working people so that more companies in the United States would use it. They probably didn't all use it in the same way, maybe a portion of the work force would participate and another portion not, but Herman Miller everybody participated. Sometimes it paid some pretty nice bonuses at the end of the month, or at the end of the quarter or at the end of the year, whatever the set up was. Also some not so good because business fluctuated and you'd have a good year and then maybe you'd have a poor year, as all businesses have. The better the business, the more your furniture move and the better you made it, the more attractive to the average customers, you get business. That

meant work and that meant bonus. If not, when then you're on the short end of it a little bit. More things in life work that way. The harder a person works and the better job you can do, the more work you're going to get and the people are going to like it, maybe you'd be rewarded for that kind of stuff. That's the way Scanlon plan works too. The better and the faster and the more attractive, all that will help. And you can pick up business and orders that way much faster by having a good product.. More selling, the more business, the bonuses climb. They're still using it today. I still talk to a few people that work there. Of course that's now almost the second generation that works there. I'm eighty-eight years old, twenty-six years ago that I retired so I do not keep in touch with that kind of stuff. There's a few people that I know, younger, they still make some pretty good bonuses there, but it varies, just like business. That's the way that plan works. It was for the betterment of Herman Miller company and its employees because some people made some pretty nice bonuses and were able to do things with it, which you wouldn't do with ordinary wages.

AH: When you were still with Herman Miller had they started to grow internationally?

RS: Oh yes. When I was still there they were already doing business outside of the United States, in Europe first. I think they are even now in Japan and all over the place. It's really nothing new anymore. It was already coming when I was still working there. I've been out of there twenty-seven years, an awful lot has happened in that time that I don't know nothing about, except for what I read and maybe you have read things like that too. It's interesting to me. And I'll tell you what, the older you get, you kind of fade away from that stuff a little bit. I don't know if that's true in everybody, but you

lose a little touch, you're interest lags a little bit. A retired person, Howard Johnson, I think they keep him working there a day a week, a few days a month, he edits a Herman Miller retiree paper. You read quite a bit in there, mostly about retirees. Howard Johnson is his name. What's his name over there at the archives?

AH: Bob Viol.

RS: Bob Viol. Howard Johnson referred your request or some request from your organization to him, came my way. Bob Viol called one day and said, "I want to talk to you." I got over there and I guess that's how we got in touch, that's how I got your letter. I said to Bob Viol, "I think sometimes they got the wrong person because I don't think they want to know much about Herman Miller, they want to know more about history of the city and so forth." I'm a little vague on some of the history of Herman Miller because as I said I was not in the top group. The highest I got was a foreman in the shipping department and the upholstering department. That kept me close to the front, but not the intricate, delicate things that really meant something.

AH: How long were you a foreman?

RS: I was in upholstery...I would say maybe ten years and I was in the shipping room five years. That was in the latter part of my working days.

AH: So you worked all the way up...

RS: ...All the way up from the machine room. That was the beginning where the stuff started where we cut it and ripped it and there was raw lumber.

AH: When do you think Herman Miller grew the most?

RS: In years?

AH: Or what phase? Was it office furniture or when you came back to residential furniture also?

RS: I think when they started to switch from residential, from home furniture, to office furniture is when the company changed considerable, in almost all ways. Not in money wise, the way they looked at things. They wanted to take care of the office end of the world. That's what they felt was the most needed thing. Household furniture, well people who are living in trailers, and apartments, furniture wasn't needed like it was in former days. That changed Herman Miller's picture pretty much. That was in the '40's and the '50's. Then they start becoming big. Then when they moved from Washington Street where the old plant is and built a new plant, that started in the '50's and then they kept expanding year after year. Now they've got plants several places all over the world.

AH: That must have been amazing to start at this small company and then by the time you retire, it's one of the biggest furniture companies?

RS: It was a great experience for me, but that's the only place I ever work so that's the only thing I know. You don't pay any attention to other companies, although these same things are happening to other companies. You could go to Howard Miller Clock Company, you could go to Mead Johnson's or you can go to Haworth. This is all happening to them. They start small and if they do the right thing and if they make the right stuff and if you keep sharp and good people in design and management, you're going to grow because everything else is growing, the needs. Look at this country, just look at the Holland/Zeeland area! It's just amazing. This is the way it is

in a company. As I say, Herman Miller is the only place I ever worked, that's all I know. Still, I don't know that much about the business end of it, as perhaps if I were D.J. DePree or Max DePree or Hugh DePree. They could talk more from that angle.

AH: Did you notice a lot of changes when they sold the company and it was no longer privately held?

RS: No, not really. Those changes have come since I retired. In fact now, the retirement plan has completely changed. When I retired and many others like me, we continue to get a monthly check as a pension plan. Now the present management has thrown that out, you are retiring you get so much money and you're done. That's one big change. Changes like that have taken place in other areas also, even in management. I think the DePree's are very much out of there now. Of course that's understandable, as these men grow older they're going to get out. It's still Herman Miller and it always will be I think, probably set up that way. There's a different type of people and a different generation, who have different thoughts and ideas about management than in the olden days. Still, I wish them well, naturally. I have a lot of friends working there, a lot of them have retired that I know real well and they slowly pass away too. I don't pay as much attention to it now as when you work there. I think maybe that's true to every person. You kind of fade away a little bit.

AH: Do you think when you used to work there, there was a very good relationship between the employees and the managers, or the DePrees?

RS: Oh yes. I think management, the days of the DePrees, D.J., Hugh and Max, was somewhat better than it is perhaps today. I think the reason is, you were just a little

bit closer. I knew DePree lived in town here, Hugh and Max, they lived in town. Now the big wheels, they probably live in Grand Rapids and who knows where and got the managers here. In those days workers could talk to these bosses, the D.J. DePree anytime they came to the plant, and they came to the plant a lot more. Maybe there's some workers there now that have never seen the top man. That's about the way I would put it. I think it's not as close as it used to be, let's put it that way. It's not that friendly, family, Dutch.

AH: That's probably natural with the growth.

RS: I think you're right. This may be true in many other companies. These old-timers, they pass out of the picture. The feeling was somewhat more family like in olden days. Everything you did and said and how you operated, you had to be a good worker naturally, and you want to do your job. It was a knit family business in those days a lot better than it is today. It's dog eat dog now. A lot of time people ask me, "How come you stay there that long?" I can't answer that except, hey they treated me good. I did my job that I was required to do and I worked hard. I have to admit, I worked hard. And I did a lot of other things besides, civic life and so forth and so on. They treated me right and I liked the company, I liked the people. You get stuck with a good bunch of people, hey, why move? The wages weren't all that big, but that's true to everybody. That's about my life story at Herman Miller.

AH: So Hugh and Max are D.J.'s sons?

RS: Yes.

AH: And who is the president now?

RS: A man by the name of Volkema.

AH: Oh that's right, Mike Volkema.

RS: That's the name. He's not related to the DePree's. In fact, any of his assistants and so on, I doubt if there's any DePree family in there any more. In fact, I'm almost sure that there's not, but they're still connected with the company. I imagine they've got stock in it, but nothing to do with management anymore. D.J. of course has passed away a number of years ago and Hugh was in Florida all the time, he lives there. Max lives in Holland. I think they go to the board of directors meeting and that's about it.

AH: When you retired were the DePree's still involved?

RS: Oh yes. When I retired D.J. was the manager and Hugh was his assistant and Max was coming up. Then as D.J. stepped out of the picture, retired, although he went there to his dying day, but not in the part of management. Hugh took over, then Hugh stepped down and Max came in the picture. It was definitely a big family affair.

AH: And they would come down to the plant?

RS: Oh yes, yes. The offices were right connected with the plants. Hardly a day or so where you wouldn't see one the DePree's through the plant. In fact, Hugh and Max actually worked in the plant when they were younger. I know in the upholstery room, they worked there when I was there as laborers. This was part of their training.

AH: What do you think your favorite position was?

RS: I always enjoyed the shipping department. That was the end of the road. Not only that, that's where you saw it go out of the door. That's what you were there for,

everybody was for that matter. When they went over to the blanket wrap furniture hauling across the country, all over, it got to be real interesting because you didn't have to crate it anymore, you didn't have to carton it. Blanket wrap it and in to these big vans.

AH: You were shipping all over the United States then?

RS: All over, every where.

AH: That's amazing, and how big Herman Miller has gotten today.

RS: It has amazed many people, how they could start from a little place on Washington Street over there, it's still there now. How they started, a hole in the wall and what they are today, it's unbelievable. But this goes on in every company, not everyone, but most companies. They start from scratch. Look at Chrysler and Ford Motor Company, you can name them. They start small, but they make the right thing, what people need and want, the right management, they make it good, it sells. And of course you've got to be smart, you've got to fight that competition all the time, which isn't easy, especially nowadays, worse in the last twenty-five years to fight competition than it was prior to that. There just weren't too many of them there doing that same thing. Now everybody's trying to make a nickel and going into the same type of business. Haworth wasn't around, that other company...

AH: Steelcase?

RS: They were around. They were one of the biggest competitors Herman Miller ever had. There's a couple more in Holland that started up, I can't think of what...

AH: Trendway?

RS: That's it. They just weren't around. People like that, they had a couple of boys that probably each came out of some big furniture factory, let's start our own little business, probably start in a two stall garage. Look at Haworth, look how big they are today. And this Trendway is getting bigger all the time too. That's life. All you have to do is look at Ford Motor car, seem them way back, see what they looked like, now look at today. Hey, people are getting smarter maybe. They have more initiative on their part, more zip and what have you.

AH: Steelcase was a big competitor, did you have any other big competitors around here?

RS: No. There was some smaller ones, but I couldn't even mention the names. Steelcase has always been a big competitor, they're number one in the industry now, Herman Miller and then Haworth. But there was no Haworth and there were several others that weren't around, but there were probably smaller ones who didn't quite make it. Steelcase of course is a big boy, but Herman Miller has given them a good battle.

AH: Yes, definitely. The three now, Steelcase, Herman Miller and Haworth just seem to be pretty close. Steelcase is still by far number one, but...

RS: They're still up there, but I noticed on the stock market they're not doing too well. That's a big outfit too.

AH: Much is said about the work ethic in Holland, do you think that had a lot to do with the success of Herman Miller?

RS: Definitely had something to do with it. People were concerned about the company they worked for, they liked their company, they did a good job. Of course being of the Dutch background, they had the initiative and the so called enthusiasm, probably a

little bit more so then...

AH: Kids today?

RS: Yes, although that will all come a long ways too because they had too. That had definitely something to do with it. That family business had something to do with making Herman Miller what they are today. It's just like you working in your family. That comes first, you work the hardest for them, then help the other guy. You work hard at your own family first, that's the way with Herman Miller. The close touch the DePree's had with the employees and the market in general helped a lot because they were gentleman.

AH: Where do you think Herman Miller is going to go in the future?

RS: [laughter] Oh my dear, what a heck of a question that is. I hope they're going to continue, I hope they do well. It doesn't mean anything to me financially, except I'm getting my monthly check right along until I pass away. That's the way it goes for all of those prior to '95 I think they changed that. I wish them well. After all, they have a tremendous investment, not only here, but elsewhere, all over. That's got to stay there. I'd hate to see them lose sight of all that and lose it. I don't think they will unless they, of course you don't know what the economy is going to do in this world. We hope for the better every day, we hope that it will continue, but that's not sure. We've also had days of depression, I've lived through them. That was long before you were born, but we had a bad depression in the '30's and early '40's.

AH: How did that hit Herman Miller?

RS: Well, they kept their head above water, but it was slim pickings. Their total

employees wasn't so high because you laid them off because there wasn't no work and maybe you only work two or three days a week or something like that. When I started, twenty-five cents an hour.

AH: I can't imagine.

RS: No you can't. When I got married, we were renting for eight dollars a month, a pretty good home. A loaf of bread would cost you eight cents. Look what you're paying today. That's the way the whole thing is. I am eighty-eight years old and I've been blessed and fortunate enough to see, I've been around. I've been in city affairs, on the fire department. I even was Mayor for four years. I've seen a lot of that, it affected me not only personally, but generally, all of these things. Sometimes you say it ain't what it used to be, people make that statement. And somethings aren't what they used to be, let's face it. Family life is not what it used to be. Religious life is not what it used to be. Even some business is not what it used to be, but yet if you're broad minded enough like myself, I'm not that old fashioned, you like to see business improve and grow and everybody have a job. We hope that continues that way because whoa my dear girl, if we'd ever hit a depression now. We just better hope and pray that that doesn't happen because things are just so different. Like I said, I'm old fashioned enough to say, "What's that guy doing with two cars? Or what's he got a boat for?" It's none of my business. If he can afford it, a beautiful home, two cars, three cars and boats, fine. If he pays his bills that's fine. It's just a little difficult for people like me to understand and get used to that, yet I can see it. If the guy wants to do it, it's up to him, but you've got to work for it. If he does, fine. Let him have it.

If he thinks he can handle it, good.

AH: Ok, well thank you so much for your time.

RS: Well you're welcome. I didn't know exactly what this paper meant, what we were going to talk about. I've been a pretty busy guy all my life, even recreation wise. I had a lot to do with that in the city, being an official in softball, then twenty-five years in city hall, fire department. I enjoyed every bit of it, and I don't regret it at all. My family suffered every once in awhile a little bit as you can understand. I was gone a lot. Now I can't do it anymore. Alright, that's it.

AH: Thanks a lot.