

Oral History Project 2002
Joint Archives of Holland
Holland Police

Interviewee:
Captain Robert DeVries
(Interview #2, Edited)

Conducted by:
Matthew Nickel
22 May 2002

ABSTRACT: (Topics Appear in similar order of Transcript)
His work on HPD History, Portrait of the Early Force, Role of Marshals, History, HPD Enforcement, Antles/Van Hoff Mystery, Community Criticism, Race, Use of Force, Growth Effect, Effect of Gangs, Female Officers, Lifestyle of Families, Role of Officers, Creative Policing, Leadership, Future of HPD

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MN: More generally, what kind of work have you done to piece together a history of the Holland Police, I know it is pretty broad, but...

RD: All the way from contacting the archives, which we found when we started getting interested in it, they had minimum information. It was actually years ago when all the little history quips you would see in the paper once in a while. I have always enjoyed history, so I started doing some digging and found out that we really, on our main floor level up here, had minimum to no history. A lot of times, most of the items, or records have just been tossed. And I started asking around, and found that really nobody had overseen any of the history, so I went to our basement into our archive area, where we archive our records, management, and digging through old boxes, I happened to come across several old books, some papers, that had been stored down there for lord knows how long. Right down to where we used to track in a book, complaints that would come in and payroll, years and years ago, as to how much people were to be paid on payday. It's been a matter of just scratching around, talking with people, individuals, at the same time what ever we could find here.

MN: Former officers?

RD: Yes, former officers that had been with the department, and those that at time were still on the department that could give me as much information as possible. So with that, I happen to come across an old book, that started to list our staffing

by dates of hire. Then I managed to come up with a ledger down in the basement, and that also had been tucked away. So I was able to track it right now to what I believe is our very first city marshal. City marshals have served in between there, and then, one we became a police department in 1907, our staff from that point on. That's what I've been working on in the last several years.

MN: Would you be able to give a portrait of the early force?

RD: I could, I guess as best that I know right at this point. What I found out that was kindof interesting is, when they came here, when the Dutch settled in this particular area, they didn't believe there was any need for law enforcement. It was basically handled by the church, those types of things that would be problems in the community, and from there it went to what was called a Volksvergaterin, or Volksgaterin I believe. I can't tell you the exact pronunciation of it, but it was basically a gathering of all the males in the colony over the age of 18, that would hear different types of problems that had occurred, and then come down with a method to resolve it. From there it moved into actually the formation of our first city marshal, who was Teunis Keppel. I believe it was 18... 1847. Excuse me, Volksgaterin were aged over 20. And 1867 was our first city marshal, not 1847. It is kindof interesting because we came across different writings that I would find, and information, was the first badge was made by a jewelry firm called Bregman and Joselyn, and was made by melting down two silver dollars into the shape of a star, and I believe the museum has one of those original badges to the best of my knowledge. And we served, the city marshal served throughout that time period of '67 to 1907 when the city charter was adopted. And our first

Police Chief was Fred Kamferbeek, and ironically our old police department and this building as well, is resting on Fred Kamferbeek's home. The site of where his home actually was.

MN: So what kind of role did they play, I am sure it was a different role, but what was the role of the marshals and then the first police force.

RD: There is really... very little that I can track in regards to the marshals. Because I don't know how much of it actually was in writing at that time, and so much of that took, you know, those records we just haven't been able to locate. One thing we were able to, is the title changed 21 times in the time period, but some of the same individuals would come back, that used to be marshals and so on, and then they came back. I'll print you a copy of what we have been able to track thus far.

MN: That would be excellent.

RD: And that's getting to be, how many pages now that we are up to... 9 pages. These go from the first term, the marshals, and then what I have been able to track through that ledger right now are the officers, from our very first chief, Fred Kamferbeek, to one officer here that served five days, another officer that only served three days. And then I also get into it and like you say, ran into some time periods where the ledger was not right on track and other officers I am not sure when they retired or were still here. But in 1907, then we were able to track some of the duties of the officers. As a matter-of-fact, they set a standard; they set physical requirements at that time. Officers had to be at least 23 years of age, weight at least a 165 pounds, and be at least 5' 9". The department at that time, the very first police department consisted of the chief, and five police officers. A

police officer made a \$1.92 a day. They had one bicycle that they used if they had to respond to a call. So if there happened to be two officers, one rode the bike and the other would run behind. And then their performance, job performance, I think I mentioned it to you last time, they were held accountable for what occurred. They were banned; officers were banned from speaking with each other while on duty, and not permitted to speak with anyone else, unless they were addressed first. And when walking a patrol beat they had to change from one side of the street to the other at each intersection, to ensure better coverage so that they didn't always stay on one side, required to know everyone in their patrol area, and were held accountable for every crime that occurred on their beat while on duty. Some of the ordinances I was able to come across that they used to have was, no racing of a horse was permitted anywhere in the city. There was a speed limit of eight miles per hour, now how they were able to try that is a good question. [Laughter] No attaching of a horse to a shade or an ornamental tree. All horses had to be secured when left unattended. One of the things that we were able to track is the, when the first City Hall was built, the City Hall as it stands now, in the, I believe it was in the northwest corner was where the first city police department jail was. There actually was a holding facility in there. And the environmental health had been in there at least before the renovations and so on. [Pause] I can make a copy of this too if you'd like.

MN: That would be excellent.

RD: So, I'll make copies of that for you. That is just what I have been able to come up with thus far.

MN: So, you have gleaned all this from records and ledgers that were just sort of hidden with in the department?

RD: Yes. Just files, just started piecing it together, and interviews, like I say, with people that I talk with. Mainly the tracking of the employees with different ledgers that I was able to find, as a matter-of-fact, here's some of the, to give you an idea, how much searching you would have to do. [Shows ledger] These are getting fairly old. These are some of the things that they would handle. Nineteen thirty-four suicide, unknown body found in lake. Drownings that occurred in 1934. I don't know, that's just how they kept track of the records, from those, and then you would have, and this is where I was able to start to piece things together with officer's staff, here's Norris Williams, 15 years old, Railroad 6, killed in auto collision, 32nd and Michigan, that was in 1940. Talks about who the patrolmen were at that particular time. [Searching through ledger] List of their vacation days, when they were on vacation, Just finding several of these books down in the basement is how I was able to start working on some of the, right down to scores for pistol... years of service, start dates, see these were things that I used quite heavily. [Looking through ledger]

MN: One thing you might be interested in, I am not sure if you have looked through the City Clerk's files in the Archives, and, because they have the Police and Fire Board records. I am not sure if those would ever help you any.

RD: Okay, yes... See these, [points to ledger] this is how I started putting these together. Here's June 1, appointed 1907, when the department first started.

MN: So are these pretty much the files that you have found.

RD: Yes, digging in boxes in the basement. Pete Steketee, this is the property that he was issued. And it was fun; I had good time I had going through it. John Wagner, number four, this is what he was issued: pair of handcuffs, jail key, alarm key, three cell keys, booth key, there was his serial number. [Pause] Fred Kieft. Violation of bicycle ordinance, they would write down the people, who they had, fine had cost \$3.00.

MN: Definitely quite a change from...

RD: today...

MN: computers

[Laughter]

RD: Exactly, but that is what I would just start digging through and try to put it together as best is could, and figure it out, and just when you would think that you are doing really good on some, along would come other dates that would not match up and then I'd have to change it to a question mark, right down to what I found is this shovel right along side of you there which was the shovel that was used to break ground for this building. I got that out, because hey, that would be kindof neat, we could get another shovel when we break ground here this fall, we'd have the two of them. So we'd have both of them to display, I am hoping we'll have an area where we can display some of this stuff. And I actually started digging, and it was really ironic, the guys knew I was interested and was trying to do as much as, and I actually wrote in the city newsletter, I put a couple of articles in there on some of our history, and more people would respond, and I got called up, one day I was working, and I got called to the front desk, and one of our

officers, Pete Bontekoe from years ago, his family happened to come in and say, *is there anybody here that is interested in history in the department*, and they said well yeah, and they mentioned myself. He had passed away, but they brought in his old nightstick and bobby helmet. Officers used to, years and years ago, wear a bobby helmet type, and they brought that in. And gave it to us, and we now have it on display in our display case. Weird little things, all of a sudden, someone would say, well DeVries is interested in that, and they would point them in my direction. We'd sit down and talk and chat as much as we could, and that is where it has come from.

MN: Wow that's really interesting! So you probably, are you able to understand, at all, understand the changes the force has gone through over the years, of the materials?

RD: Yes, right down from where the officers would respond on bike, in 1907, to when we got our first cars, and this sort of stuff. They would have to go up to River Ave. and look to see if a light was on. They would turn a light on if there was a call and then they'd have to check in with the station to find out what they had to respond to, because they had no radios in their cars. There's some disagreement as to when exactly we got the radios, but it was generally around the time of World War II. That's when the officers first started getting the radios. Well, then it went from the car radio to the portable radio to now the officers are actually being dispatched by computer. They can actually go out on a shift and never really have any voice communication with central dispatch. They technically can be dispatched totally by computer. And converse back and forth with computer.

So it's amazing to see us go from having to respond on a bicycle, to what they have available to them there. To fingerprinting, to where we have come with fingerprinting, with the automatic, the fingerprint identification system, that looks, not just statewide, but nationwide. It has just been a multitude of changes that we have seen. It is really interesting to see it from the old revolvers to what they used to carry to us going to larger caliber revolvers, to our first semi-automatics, to an upgrade of the automatics a few years ago to a forty caliber. Then you have the bulletproof vest, that's a whole... those things have occurred throughout the seventies.

MN: It is interesting because I have been reading some of the Clerks files, and how discrepancies here and there like you have described. One of the interesting ones I have found involves Jack Van Hoff and Chief Antles, I don't know if you have run into this as well.

RD: [Laughs] Yes, as a matter of fact it's in here [opens file], Van Hoff, I don't remember anything on that one per se... where is it here?

MN: When Jack Van Hoff replaced Chief Antles, there were, I guess it happened over the discretion, the police board went over, over ruled the City Council in some way. With the materials I have had to work with there is a very large question marks. And that's all...

RD: This is what I have been able to come up with, 1939 Chief Van Rye retired, and replaced by Ira Antles. He only lasted until April of 1940, and I think it was a news article, or how I came up with it, but there's a variety of different charges against him and claims, but on of which is his reference to police work as being

“90% BS and 10% backbone,” was one of the comments that drew a lot of problems with him, and then he did get replaced by Jake Van Hoff, who served until 1966 or somewhere around there, so that was one of them. I did come up with that, but I would like to look at the City Minutes, the council minutes, what that kind of stuff has to say about it, it would be interesting to see.

MN: You would be interested there are a lot of things in quotation marks that assume that the reader knows the situation and, you might know, probably would know better than I would. But I have been curious reading those files. Some of the discrepancies of that nature sounded like they would overlap with what you have done so far. I guess along those lines, that you know of in the history of the force, has the Holland Police ever been criticized by either the community or surrounding communities.

RD: Never. [Laughs] I am kidding you. Oh, yes, by all means. There has been different things that have happened, but I guess it would, we have complaints against officers that are investigated, have officers ever been discharged, yes, they have, so I mean that, it goes in streaks. To give you specifics on it, some I could, some I wouldn't be able to because of personnel type issues. By far, our department has a very good reputation across the state, and across the nation, with what we do. Just the nature of the business we are involved in, there are criticisms that do come up.

MN: What kinds of actions bring the most kinds of criticisms, and not necessarily warranted or unwarranted criticisms but what kinds of complaints are usually filed?

RD: Racial type incidents. Where individuals claim that perhaps some enforcement or contact with them was based solely on race. That's where you see it a lot, and it is not just us, this is a national that is going on right now with racial profiling, which everyone has heard considerably. Excessive force claims would be additional ones. That's probably two of the more common, would be the amount of force that was potentially used and I mean, you can go from the days of the 1960s, where it was back then, kick butts and take names, and that was the way police work was. It was not uncommon for the officers to get into the all out fisticuffs, and it was no big deal. Or to just blatantly sit there and bump somebody in the head with a billy club. Or saps that they used back then, which were leather, filled a lot of times with steel. To the point where you have seen progression. If you think back to the sixties with the democrat riots and so on that took place. Not democrat riots, from the democrat convention when they had the fights, and the charges of police brutality. To the point now where officers use any form or method of physical force, it's documented. And there has to be, we work on what is called a continuum of force where we start with certain methods which are like verbal commands and so on, to physical and right on up to the point where you would use deadly force, and there has to be justification for each level of escalation as to why you then moved to this level, and then what you did at that particular level. And with every single report, if force is used, it is completed and is attached to that report, so that we have documentation as to what did occur. A lot of changes over the years have taken place. We will get people who will call or criticize a lot of times, because they simply don't understand how

the department function. We may show up and maybe there has been a fight. Let's say it is between you and I, the officers show up. Let's say I assaulted you, you are waiting for us to come and arrest me. We can't do it, because it was a misdemeanor offence that was not committed in our presence. So then we have to seek a warrant. So, a lot of times people felt that the police officers, they thought, why aren't they doing anything about it? A lot of it is educating the people as to what we can and cannot do as well. Those types of things where you get people who will call or criticize, you know, take for example, probably one of the latest things that occurred here where people would question it would be the high speed chase that took place two weeks ago with a stolen truck, those types of things. By nature of the business that we are in, it is dangerous and things do happen, and they happen in a moment's notice.

MN: I don't know if your research has shown at all how the force is changed through the growth of the city of Holland, but are you able at all to speak on that kind of subject?

RD: Yes, somewhat. The department was five or six strong, and then moved into, I cannot give an exact counting, I could if I went back and started to break it all down. I have not really done that to see how we have grown, there was some significant growth after World War II, there was some significant growth in the sixties, and probably the largest growth was in the seventies. And then the department did not really get or have any expansion until, the '80s. And that was when we, late '80s, early '90s when we wrote for the grants and started to expand through community policing. To give an example, I started in 1977 with the

department, and in 1980 I went on the road full time. There were 50 sworn at that time in 1980, so in a 22-year time period, now we are at 63 sworn. So over 22 years we have grown over 13 positions.

MN: What specifically have gangs done to effect the police department internally, how have you changed as a result?

RD: Well, I can definitely tell you that because when I was promoted in 1999 into community services, so people would ask then what we were doing about gangs, and it was really easy to tell people, nothing. Because we weren't dealing with gangs. It was not until about '91 when we started to experience some of the gang activity. And since that time period that is when we saw some of the expansion, we moved into community policing, where we had to officers directly in the neighborhoods. So community policing was a result of some of the gang related issues. We have created a lot of technology, gang databases, that we can work with and share with, we have officers who have become trained in and become very well versed in identifying gang graffiti. People can see it up there, what does it mean, what does it say? Ninety nine percent of the individuals are not going to be able to tell you. We have created the street team, which is a two-person plain-clothes team that concentrates on street level and gang, alcohol, and drug reinforcement. So they are working those types of crimes. Our detectives have become more verse in regards to the gang activity, up until, and to include in the last couple of years, working with the US Attorney's Office on indictments. In '99 when we ad all the firebombings here, the gangs adopted what they called their code of silence, and there's ways to break those as well, and that is through

Federal Grand juries where they are forced to testify, and we chose to move into the federal system. We were going to do whatever we had to do, to make it work. In a 12 year time period, the department has really come long way. We had to learn and grow with it as it occurring in the community too, because we weren't prepared for it.

MN: One interesting detail that I have run into is there is a Holland Sentinel article in 1926 woman being hired onto the police force, which to my boss and I, we wonder about this, because it seems so bizarre in Holland that still does not have suffrage, has also hired a police woman. But we don't know the credibility of this yet but still looking into it but, how is gender, the woman officer changed and how has that changed the department having women join the force?

RD: Big time. If it was in '26, I would dare say it would be clerical, clerical type staff. I have documented our sworn officers, let me grab that because I printed that out for you.

[Leaves for printer, then returns]

RD: Lets see, I think Betsy Wackernagel was our first female, I might be wrong, Cindy may have been it. Yes, Cindy Fricke was our first female. It is possible in '26 with somebody like that that did solely parking type enforcement, but '72 is the first female officer that I can track, and that was Cindy Fricke, who I had the opportunity to work with. Great lady. And then Betsy Wackernagel was the second female that was hired; she is now a professor out in, I think it's the University of Montana. But we now have, I believe it is eight female officers. When I started we had one female officer, no female cadets, and I think we had

four or five female civilian staff. They worked out of the female locker room here. At that time was, the place was built in '72 when we just hired out our first female. It was sufficient, to what it is today it's pathetic. To be very honest with you, and that was one of our big pushes too towards the whole new facility, building is so we have eight female officers working out of a building that was basically designed for none. It was more or less at that time just a matron's lounge is what it was called. And that is where they can go and sit and have coffee. Or something to that effect. To say how we actually police, hasn't changed in that regard. The female officers are very well accepted, and do a great job. They were very upset, many of them, over what occurred over in Kentwood, and then a female officer there, female officer there being severally beaten, and then the questions that are raised is well, should, if there is a female is on the road, be a male with her and this sort of stuff. It was basically taking it, the whole women moving into law enforcement moving back into the sixties. Our officers are very capable of handling situations on the roads. To say that it has caused problems on the roads, it has not at all. Very well accepted. In fact, our officer of the year this year was a female officer. So she does a great job. Well respected in the community and well respected in the department.

MN: And who is she?

RD: Lisa Bancuk. So she was actually assigned to Hope College and that area as well with their team coordinator. She does a great job.

MN: I guess beyond law enforcement, law enforcement in the community and communication, we talked about last time, which seems good. Outside of law

enforcement, what is the role of the officer in Holland, in the Holland community? What kinds of roles do the officers take, outside of law enforcement, in the community, or is that very much the individuals discretion?

RD: The individual's discretion. Totally up to that individual. I guess most are very active in the community in regards to civic type groups. School activities, family comes utmost at the top of the list. Wide variety of different face, there is no specifications what is expected of them in the community when they are off duty.

MN: As an officer, could you describe how the job affects the lifestyle of the family, of the officer?

RD: What's it like?

MN: Yes, what is it like on the family? How does it affect the lifestyle of the family of the officer? It's tough, you have a multitude of different things, because the officers work a wide variety of shifts, and most individuals are in say a different work days, evenings or midnights. And that is their shift. The officers rotate, they don't stay on days, they don't stay on evenings, they don't stay on midnights, they rotate every several months so that whole rotation thing makes it extremely difficult. You don't know from, well you can know all year in advance what you're schedule is going to be but when, you have got to plan you vacations around those types of things. Same thing if you work weekends. They work holidays. It can be tough when you are riding around on Christmas eve night, and everybody is at someone else's home it seems, enjoying family time and the holidays, and you are out riding around in the cruiser in the snow and the cold, it can be depressing. So those types of things. An we are real open with the

holidays and make sure that the officers do get time to see family. So it does, that in itself plays a role, but then you add to it the types of things that are involved in. The unknown as to what they are involved in. They can go from having absolutely nothing to do, probably a way to describe the job like I have heard said before, hours of boredom with moments of sheer terror. They have got to be able to respond, probably the best way to describe some of it is what has been said about 9/11, what occurred in New York, where thousands and thousands of people fleeing out of that area, you've got several hundred police and firefighters running into. They are trained and respond without even thinking about it. There's a problem, it is their job to go in and take care of it. It is different on the families and so on, and you'll see generations of police officers, we've got officers here that have sons that are now involved in law enforcement, maybe even daughters, I am not sure. I don't believe we do, that have gone into law enforcement. That's unique. But it does weigh on it, and that is why we make sure family time here is very important.

MN: Have you seen the family lifestyles of officers change over the years, or some of the challenges and the rewards still the same?

RD: I would say about the same.

MN: What do you think the, how do you think the role of the officer has changed over the years, after reading about these guys from way back when, to now where you talk about using all the technology and gang databases?

RD: Well, technology is obviously great, but in essence we've kindof come back around too, where here the officers, like I said, were held accountable you know

in 1907 for what is occurring in their area, we've now got officers assigned to permeate areas, so they are responsible for their particular area, for what crime does occur in there and what problems are occurring that they have got to be able to resolve or solve them. In some essences, we've come back around but we've got just better technology now as a tool to assist us, but we've always said here and I firmly believe in it, that the officers are, you can have the absolute best technology, but without talking with people and being able to communicate with people you are not going to solve problems. Technology is not going to do it alone. You need the people skills too.

MN: I have heard the Holland Police, the way you police, your style is being described as creative, now how do you think...

RD: We'd like to think so...

[Laughs]

MN: Law enforcement artists, how do you think you guys work to be creative in your law enforcement and your problem solving?

RD: Well, the one thing we have always had here is good leadership where our chiefs have been open to looking at different things, we get involved in different associations, different organizations. The chief attends the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police Conference, and the International Association, and we always used to laugh too when Lindstrom would go and there would be groans when he would come back because he would come back with just these gobs of ideas that he would want to have us look into and possibly implement. While you are groaning in one aspect, you are proud in the other, that they are out there looking,

and Lindstrom right up until the last months of his retirement, where you would think you are winding down your last year and you think just let me finish my last year and let me get my time in and go, was still looking at ways to constantly improve things. So getting involved in those things and looking and then taking what other departments are doing and then molding it to how it can best work in our community is probably what we are tried to do and we've developed quite a reputation around the state as an agency to watch as to what we are doing. And then others would jump on and implement in that area. So we're proud of the at for an agency ourselves.

MN: Do you think that will change with the construction of the building?

RD: Hopefully we will just get better yet. I see the department just continuing, we've got the drive to not be status quo, we've got the drive to do the best that we can do in the community. I can tell you right now, what we are doing today five years from now; we probably will not be doing all of it. Because in five years the community is going to look different and doing different things, so we have to respond. Things have changed since September 11th in regards to how you respond to things and look at things, so if you say that what we are doing now or would dare say is going to last us 10 years, no way. A department would cease to exist. Or need some definite turnover.