

Oral History Interview with
Myra Berry

(unedited)

Conducted November 20, 1997
by Phyllis Booi

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interviewer: Phyllis Booii

PB: Would you please state your name and date of birth.

MB: Myra Kleis Berry, and I was born [date removed], 1923.

PB: You were born in Holland?

MB: I was born in Holland in the old Holland Hospital, which then became the Netherlands Museum, and now is a bed and breakfast. In fact, I was probably one of the last babies born there in 1923. I guess it was open a few more years after that.

PB: Have you lived here all your life?

MB: No, I lived here until 1946 when I was married, and then was gone for 43 years. We moved back here in May of 1988.

PB: Talking about your moving away, have you noticed any difference in Holland?

MB: Oh, my goodness! I often think I wish mother and dad were still here to see it. It's unbelievable. You can imagine--43 years. Even in the eight years that we've been here there have been so many changes.

PB: What do you notice as the biggest change?

MB: The traffic, and the drivers are kind of insane. Just the way it has built up--what used to be little country roads where we used to go for our Sunday afternoon rides, are now all built up. And of course, the change in the population. The demographics has changed tremendously.

PB: You went to Hope College?

MB: Yes.

PB: When did you graduate?

MB: I graduated in 1945.

PB: Is that where you met your husband?

MB: Yes, he was there during the war with an Army unit--an ASTP unit. He was there for five months. That's when we met. After the war we were married.

PB: Your dad was a professor at Hope?

MB: Yes, he was the physics department for many, many years. Of course, that's something that's really changed--the size of the campus and the college. The faculty was such a small-knit group then.

PB: In the changing of the area around here and so forth, when you were growing up, everybody probably knew you, would you say? Because of your dad...

MB: Pretty much--it was a very small town. The high school was small, and everyone knew of everyone else. Maybe not intimately, but certainly...

PB: They knew who you were the daughter of...

MB: That's right. They could connect you with somebody. You can even do that today. You know, you are afraid to say anything about anybody. (laughs)

PB: Holland has been recognized as one of the ten all-American cities. What qualities do you think have earned Holland this honor?

MB: I think one thing is the perseverance of its leaders who are willing to go after it. I think there is a certain amount of that that is necessary. And certainly the city has much to offer. When we were going to move from the east out to Holland, Michigan,

everybody said, "Where?" They really thought we were moving to the boonies. But it's a wonderful place to live. I think the town is very forward looking, the leaders certainly are on top of things. We find it a wonderful place to live as retirees.

PB: I know the church played an important part in your life. What church did you grow up in?

MB: Until I was about five, we went to First Reformed. Then there was some problem, and I can't tell about that because back then parents didn't talk in front of their children. But I knew that my father was unhappy about something. We changed to Third Church, and that's where I was married.

PB: What church do you go to now?

MB: We're members at Hope Church. We joined there because when we moved back that's where our daughter and grandchildren went. What we didn't know is that they didn't go very often. But we're very happy there (laughs).

PB: Are you active in church now that you're retired?

MB: Probably not as active as we have been in the past. We kind of are willing to let the young people take over--and they are very happy to take over. They sometimes don't appreciate the wisdom of age.

PB: What have you noticed in the churches, the difference as it was? When you were growing up as to now. The faces, of course, are older and younger...

MB: I think when I was growing up, Hope Church was always looked on as kind of the leader in breaking away from stodginess, let me put it that way. Now I think the other churches have kind of caught up. I remember when they started serving us

Sunday night supper, that was unheard of back in the '40s, but it proved to be a very popular thing and was good for them. Now of course, that's just something so ridiculously silly, no one would even bat an eyelash at that or many other things that go on.

PB: The church has changed in their thinking...different churches generally in Holland. What kind of a role do you think they are playing now as the community has enlarged and more needs have to be met?

MB: I think the churches are trying to fill that need, and I am certainly happy to see them go that direction. I think more people are involved in meeting these needs--whether through the church or on their own through other organizations. To me, that's the test of a good church--how much they do in the community for people all week long, not just Sunday services.

PB: As you see it, what role does Hope College play in the community, or vice versa?

MB: To me, it wouldn't be the same community without Hope College. I think it offers so much and makes Holland what it is. Plays a very important role.

PB: Have you noticed that the students are more involved in our community? Have you noticed anything in the paper?

MB: I do read things in the paper about how the sororities do different things and the fraternities, and just individual students. I think there is more of that now than when I was in school. And maybe there wasn't as much need then. It was a different time.

PB: That could be. You can see that the life of the college has changed through the years. The Hope theatre...

MB: Wonderful, absolutely wonderful. We go every summer and say we don't need anything better than this. It's so convenient.

PB: What is your heritage?

MB: As it happens, we had a Kronemeyer family reunion this summer, and some of these people came over shortly after Van Raalte. It was the 150th reunion, and we had 300 people gather here for three days. It was finely nice to get things straightened out. We went back, but I didn't have all the branches of the family straightened out. So now we have that written down and found it very interesting. I was related to people I didn't know I was related to.

PB: Then you probably were related to my housemother--no, she was married to a Kronemeyer.

MB: Bertha?

PB: Yes.

MB: She was my great aunt. She was married to my grandfather's brother.

PB: Years ago, it was nine-tenths Dutch, I would say--at least when I was here. Now, you notice such a difference. Has that affected people too much?

MB: I think it has affected some people too much. I think, as with any group, there are good ones and bad ones. I welcome them, really. I like to see it because I think that is the way we are going. We are not just living unto ourselves now, or even our country. It's a global economy, it's a global neighborhood. We have to get along with everybody. There will be problems--there can't help but be. But hopefully they'll be worked out in time.

PB: Suppose this had been fifty years ago and some newcomers had come into the...I wonder how they would have been treated?

MB: Not very nicely, I know. We know people now who moved into Holland--they weren't even of another race--but they were of different persuasions...they mowed their lawns on Sundays and things like that. Just because they were outsiders, I know they were not treated very nicely. They all have horror tales to tell. I don't think that was by the whole community, but there are always some people who can't accept anything new.

PB: How has the role of women changed in Holland over the past several decades? Let's start with work...

MB: Certainly there are more women in the work force. They've joined the service clubs. In government. Just making themselves heard more.

PB: How do you think life in the family has been changed?

MB: I think some women can handle it. Some families can handle it. I still prefer to think of a mother being there when her children come home from school. I'm that old-fashioned. But I also know it's not possible in all cases.

PB: Does it bother you with the ordination of women in the church?

MB: Not one bit. If they want to do it, that's fine. I would have no desire to, but if someone wants to, that's fine with me. No, that doesn't bother me. It does bother me that they changed a lot of the old hymns because it bothered them that they talked about mankind. That was never a problem with me. I knew that included me. But I guess I've never had a problem with being a woman. I kind of like it. (laughs)

PB: Has the role of women changed in education too?

MB: Well, of course. When I grew up you couldn't even be married and teach in Holland. If you got married--that was it.

PB: You did teach?

MB: Not in Holland, no. I taught for one year at Lee High School in Wyoming, Grand Rapids. Then I was married and moved away. Never to be heard from again!

(laughs) I did teach in Atlanta the first year we were married.

PB: They had no problem accepting a married woman in Atlanta?

MB: Not in Atlanta, no. They were desperate then--that was after the war. Or they would not have hired me to teach English. I was a math major, and I must say that I did not do a very good job with the English. I thought many times, if my children ever had a teacher that was so inept, I'm going to be very unhappy.

PB: What controversies have you witnessed in Holland? You've been back seven years?

MB: It will be ten years in May. The library thing, and the area center which is boiling up again. There were always controversies over "may we build this here?"--land use is a big problem. I guess the non-acceptance of some of the races that have moved in. There are certainly conflicts there that I don't like to see, but hopefully they'll work themselves out.

PB: Has anything of this type affected you? The arena, that's going to be put someplace else not close to your house.

MB: That's alright. It couldn't be close to our house. It would have to be in the city, and I think that's where it will be, and maybe that's the people that should pay for it.

(laughs)

PB: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed over the past fifty years? For instance, don't mothers still have the same problems feeding their families--what to feed them, when to feed them?

MB: I guess so, but I don't think they worry about it quite as much because they certainly don't worry about having it on the table and everybody sit down at the same time. There's always pizza. (laughs) And I think a lot of them survive on pizza. I don't know what our parents did because we didn't even know what pizza was fifty years ago.

PB: No, I didn't either. Daily life, of course is different as you said. Mother isn't at the stove. How are the concerns of young adults different from the things you were concerned about when you were a young adult?

MB: Of course, I wasn't a young adult in Holland. Unless you mean in college...

PB: In college, I would say.

MB: I think there are a lot more pressures now for them than there were for us. I suppose there was drinking on the campus then, but we didn't hear much about it. The coed dorms--of course I wasn't even in a dorm, I lived at home--but that would have been unthinkable back in those days.

PB: The frats I know would have let their apple juice ferment. That's about the worse that I ever heard of.

MB: Yes, if you lived on campus, you probably knew a lot more. Of course, I was here during the war too. The whole four years I was here, we were at war. So it was a

different experience than a normal one.

PB: Were there any fraternities active at all at that time?

MB: I think they were. I just can't remember--the sororities stayed active, the fraternities couldn't have had very many people. They probably were not. I know the Blue Key Society, which was the honor society for men, disbanded for awhile during the war. There weren't any here. I'm trying to think how many there were. I wrote a paper on it one time and I should remember--but I don't. It was pretty bleak, that's why we were very happy when those 250 soldiers came to town. They livened up the campus a good deal.

PB: Where did these 250 live?

MB: They lived in a building on the seminary campus called Zwemer Hall. It's no longer there. It's about the site of where the Cook Tower is now. There were some quonset huts. I just know about Zwemer Hall because that is where Roy lived. That's all I cared. (laughs) I knew they all lived somewhere. And I think they were in the old Emersonian House too.

PB: For entertainment, I know when I was on campus you couldn't have any dancing on campus. Did you do any dancing during the war with these new fellows--soldiers--coming in?

MB: They were only here five months, and they did have in January what they called a Military Ball at the Armory. That was quite a nice affair. And we could dance there because it wasn't on the campus.

PB: During the war, how did you manage in this area to feed yourselves? Everything was

rationed...

MB: I don't ever remember a problem. But I didn't have to worry about getting it, that was my parents' problem. I remember sugar was in short supply. I don't remember it being a problem.

PB: What do you think about teaching students in their native language? For instance, in some school districts--I'm not sure about Holland--that they would have teachers that would just teach in Spanish.

MB: I'm totally against that. I don't have firm opinions on many things, but about that, I think if people come here to live, it's incumbent on them to learn our language. There certainly are facilities and people willing to help with that. There are many examples of people who have come meaning to do that, and they can do it.

PB: And think...if your father had not learned English, or your grandfather taught him, he would never have been the professor at Hope College.

MB: That's right. And that was one of the interesting stories that came out at this reunion. My great-great grandfather came over, and he and another man who happened to be from Germany, settled pretty close to each other around Fillmore. They went to Allegan to get a teacher for their children. They insisted that she speak English because they wanted their children to learn the English language. If I went to France to live, I wouldn't think someone would have to teach me in English--I would want to learn the French language. I really don't want to, because I'm very poor at languages, but I know people can do it.

PB: How about the artistic community in Holland. We talked about the play, that form of

art.

MB: There are certainly good musical programs. I think the high school still does a good job training the students in music. At the college you can go to a program every Sunday, I think, or one during the week if you want to. The Arts Council is certainly keeping art in the foreground.

PB: What's your assessment of the city government? Are they keeping your needs in mind?

MB: We don't live in the city, we're in Park Township. But we have no complaints about what goes on in the city. We follow what they do. I have no complaints.

PB: I was wondering how you felt about the billboards. They stopped the construction of the billboards.

MB: Well, I can see why Adams is a little upset about that. But I also think the city has a right to do that within their environs.

PB: Can you think of any sage advice you can give someone who will be listening to this one hundred years from now?

MB: I really can't. I've never given a lot of advice to anyone (laughs)...unless they ask for it. Just come live here and enjoy it--it's a great town.